# POWERFUL PEOPLE

A Study of Community Organisation
in ACCORD, ASHA and GRAM

**LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCE SERIES - 2**

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ACTIONAID

# POWERFUL PEOPLE

## A STUDY OF COMMUNITY ORGANISATION
## IN ACCORD, ASHA AND GRAM

By

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Introduction

Community organisation is the pivot of the integrated development projects supported by ACTIONAID. Despite the centrality of community organisation to the development process in these projects, little effort has been made so far to examine existing experiences in terms of what works and what does not work in actual practice.

This study attempts to understand community organisation through the documentation and analysis of the experiences of three ACTIONAID partner organisations. They are ACCORD in the Nilgiris district of Tamil Nadu and ASHA and GRAM in Krishna and Adilabad districts respectively of Andhra Pradesh.

These three organisations have spent the last eight to ten years in organising their respective client communities. The local organisations that have come into existence through their efforts have reached a stage at which village units have federated and display self-management skills to varying degrees. In the case of two of the three ACTIONAID partners, exit or withdrawal plans are on the anvil.

Influencing factors related to the communities and their environments, to objectives, strategies, structure and functioning, focus on vulnerable groups, empowerment, sustainability and role of the NGO are some of the specific dimensions of community organisation that are examined in this study.

In-depth, open-ended, informal interviews and discussions with a range of NGO staff and members of the community organisation, was the main approach used in this study; direct observation especially of meetings of the community organisation at various levels; and a literature review, project reports and records also aided the study.

## Brief Outline of Each Case

## ACCORD (Action for Community Organisation, Rehabilitation and Development)

This organisation was formed by Stan and Mari Thekaekara in 1985 to enable the 35,000-odd tribal population living in Gudalur taluk of the Nilgiris district in the Blue Mountains of Tamil Nadu to overcome their exploitation, acculturation and loss of identity. This was carried out through the process of organising in order to better the cultural, social, economic and political conditions of their lives.

Gudalur has a thriving plantation economy of which seasonal employment is the only benefit available to the tribals. The loss of access to the forests, the alienation of their lands and the onslaught of mainstream development has robbed the tribals not only of their livelihood base, but, more importantly, of their self-esteem and identity.

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ACCORD has used a two-pronged organising strategy - activism and development. Under what it calls activism, are included strategies to unite the five tribes and rejenuvate tribal culture and identity, collective resistance to all forms of local exploitation - especially in relation to land, legal education and redress, and advocacy.

A tribal organisation called the Adivasi Munnetra Sangam (AMS) has been created which operates at three levels - the village, the "area" and the taluk. The AMS has acquired an identity of its own within Gudalur and beyond . It has also acquired much of the capacity required to run its own affairs. Currently, ACCORD and the AMS are in the throes of working out strategies and mechanisms wherein the AMS becomes completely autonomous in the next few years at which point ACCORD will withdraw itself.

Except for the fact that tribal women have been somewhat left out of the organising process, the AMS appears to be the best case of holistic people's empowerment.

## ASHA (Association of Social and Humanitarian Action of India)

ASHA was founded in 1980 in Vijayawada by R. S. Sharat. In 1983, it chose Mylavaram taluk of Krishna district to commence project operations. Though Krishna district is one of Andhra Pradesh's most advanced districts, Mylavaram itself was relatively poor in 1983 when the project began.

ASHA believes in people's total development, the cornerstone of which is economic well-being. It also believes that community organisation is essential to sustainable development and that development must be founded on principles of democratic and equal participation and of self-reliance.

In keeping with these beliefs, ASHA spent the first year in getting to know the area and the people on the basis of which it launched the project, the main components of which are community organisation, economic development, health and education.

Twenty seven village sanghas consisting of the male and female heads of target households have federated under an apex organisation called the Ikya Sangha Samiti.

ASHA has assisted each sangha to set-up various credit funds (crop, consumption and emergency); concomitantly, it has built the capacity of the local organisation on all the required fronts - leadership, management, record-keeping, etc.

The organisation that exists today in Mylavaram is a closely knit, well-managed and disciplined body of men and women who are equal partners at the membership and leadership levels. The thrust of the organisation is towards economic advancement. Involvement in mainstream politics is discouraged. As of September 1993 the Ikya Samiti had accessed close to Rs. 63,00,000 from the government as development assistance of various kinds for its members.

The process of ASHA's pull-out has commenced and will be completed in the next three years. Both the people and ASHA are confident of the community organisation sustaining itself.

## GRAM (Gram Abhuyudhaya Mandali)

N. Samson founded GRAM in 1980 at Dharmaram in Nizamabad district of Andhra Pradesh. The organisation has grown immensely both in size and perspective since its humble beginnings. Currently, GRAM operates 4 integrated development projects spread over two districts viz. Nizamabad and Adilabad.

In the early years GRAM was characterised by a service delivery approach to development. Its mission today is to build people's organisations. It has fostered three such local organisations in its project areas. This study covers one such organisation viz. The Dalit Velugu in Mudhol taluk of Nizamabad district.

GRAM's Vittoli project in Mudhol has been funded by ACTIONAID since 1987 and covers 30 villages. The area is predominantly agricultural and like the rest of Telangana it carries the stamp of its feudal past.

GRAM's history is marked by two distinct periods. The first covers the period from project inception in 1986 to 1988 and is best described by GRAM as the socio-economic phase which was oriented towards loosely knit beneficiary groups at village level which gradually developed into sanghas. A socio-cultural phase follows from 1989 onwards as a result of a process of reflection within the organisation. In this phase GRAM is trying to increase the people's contribution and participation in their own development and to shift the focus from economic development to people's power and rights to development benefits.

GRAM's target group is made up of families within the target area with a total income of less than Rs 1080 per capita per annum and/or with land holdings of less than five acres of dryland/two and a half acres of wetland.

In late 1993 there were 30 male and 30 female sanghas under the Vittoli project. The female sanghas function better than the male sanghas which are beset with problems of inclusion of non-target group members and dwindling loan repayment. All male and female sanghas have since 1991 federated under an apex organisation called the Dalit Velugu which functions both at the mandal and taluk levels. It is courted by politicians and the administration because of its numerical strength.

GRAM has no plans of withdrawing itself from the area. It does not think that the autonomy of the local organisation is necessarily enhanced by the removal of the sponsor from the area. On the other hand, GRAM has plans of diversifying its role into spheres such as local enterprise development in the region.

## Conclusions and Learnings

Here the factors that have enabled or inhibited the process of community organisation in the three cases studied are examined in terms of the key dimensions outlined below:

### Communities and their environments

Factors such as homogeneity, readiness or resistance to change, communal ethos and a culture of silence and dependence impact both positively and negatively upon the process of organising.

A good basic understanding of the community through a process of interaction in the early stages of the project helps to differentiate the target group from within the larger community.

Similarly, since the physical, social, economic and political conditions of a given area have a bearing upon success or failure of organisation building, a proper understanding of these factors is a precondition.

### Objectives

Objectives that are clearly stated, reflective of the aspirations of the client group and are consistently pursued are more likely to succeed than if the opposite were true.

### Strategies

Core strategies of the project are best derived through a process of collective investigation of the main causes of people's disempowerment.

The long term goal of self reliant development is more likely to be achieved if external inputs of a material nature are kept to a minimum in the initial phase of the project, while the social and value framework of the organisation is being laid, to avoid a dependency culture among the people.

### Structure and Functioning

The federation of village sanghas amplifies the power and vitality of the organisation. Federation is essential where the intention is to access benefits from and impact upon the larger development process.

The geography and size of the area under organisation and the nature of the organising tasks, determine the levels of functioning within an organisation. It is vital that all levels function equally well.

Active participation of the membership, rotation of leaders and appropriate rules and regulations contribute to healthy functioning. The degree of importance accorded to rules is seen to derive from the nature of organisation goals and strategies.

### Vulnerable Groups

Within the poor, the landless, scheduled castes and tribes, and women are most vulnerable. Unless this is established as a principle of organising from the outset, equitable development within the organisation will not be attained.

Developing well-focussed strategies to meet the special needs of these groups and the regular monitoring and evaluation of the impact of various strategies must be built into the design of the project.

The right organisational perspective, policies, attitudes and capacities concerning women's empowerment can be developed through regular reflection, training and review of programme impact.

### Empowerment

Holistic empowerment is best achieved when the organisation aims at transforming all the important dimensions of people's lives through a process of collective reflection and action on the forces that presently subjugate them.

### Sustainability

Issues of organisational sustainability are best addressed from the early stages of project intervention itself. Building the capacity of the people to keep themselves informed of important issues and policies that relate to the broader development process if overlooked, can lead to manipulation from outside.

### Role of the NGO

Since most community organisation efforts are externally initiated, the role of the NGO is critical to success. The most important lesson that can be learnt on this count relates to withdrawal or exit. A clear exit policy from the outset strengthens the autonomous and sustainable character of the local organisation.

Another lesson relates to project management. Efficient project management does not detract form the 'process' nature of local organisational development; it, in fact, vastly enables it.

# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

Community organisation is an essential component of all integrated development projects supported by ACTIONAID India. Despite its centrality to the development process in these projects, wide variances are known to exist in the way it is perceived and fostered. This study seeks to understand the many facets of community organisation from the study-cum-documentation of the experience of three ACTIONAID partner organisations, so as to be a source of learning and reflection to others involved in development. While the study is not intended in the least to evaluate success and failure, it attempts to understand what works and what does not work in the practice of community organisation.

ACCORD in Nilgiris district of Tamil Nadu, and ASHA and GRAM in Krishna & Adilabad districts of Andhra Pradesh, respectively, have been chosen as the subjects of the study. Each of these organisations have been working between eight to ten years with specific communities and community organisation has been the pivot of their development interventions. At the present juncture, community organisation in all three cases has reached a stage at which village level units or sanghas have federated, and these federations have gained an identity of their own. They are capable of self-management to a promising degree and even of mobilising considerable development assistance from the external system. Their sponsors are at various stages of handing over the reins to the community.

## 1. Aims, Objectives and Scope

The aims, objectives and scope of this study are:

## Aims

To document the experiences of select ACTIONAID-supported NGOs in the field of community organisation, examine the common lessons that can be derived from their specific experiences, and share this learning with others involved in development.

## Objectives

- To study the underlying objectives of community organisation in select ACTIONAID-supported NGO projects.

- To study the strategies and models used by these NGOs, and examine their effectiveness.

- To study the evolution of the process of community organisation, in terms of changes in NGO objectives and strategies, and the influence of external factors.

- To study the structure, dynamics and functioning of people's groups in these projects.
- To bring out the common learnings from the specific experience of each NGO.

## Scope

The study examines the process of community organisation as it relates to the community and the external environment and in terms of the following:

### Objectives

What are the objectives of community organisation? Are they to increase project efficiency, programme effectiveness, ensure community contribution, and/or bring about change in the socio-economic and political status of people? Has there been any change in objectives over time as a result of learning from experience or in response to external influences?

### Strategies

What are the models and strategies (managerial, financial, programme) used ? Are they congruent with the underlying objectives? How effective have they been? In what way have they been adapted to changing objectives and circumstances?

### Structure and Functioning

What are the underlying principles and processes of group formation? What are the norms and procedures governing people's groups (norms for membership; conduct of meetings; issues discussed; selection of leaders/office bearers; leadership style; decision-making processes; accountability)?

### Focus on Vulnerable Groups

Is there a special focus on the most vulnerable, especially women? What is the level of coverage and to what extent have they benefited? What strategies have been used and how effective have they been in terms of the following indicators:

- space for women
- personal autonomy
- social leadership
- economic independence
- participation in mainstream political processes
- access, ownership and control over resources

### Empowerment

To what extent have the strategies used for community organisation led to empowerment of the people's groups? What is the level of their participation in, and influence over electoral politics, within and beyond village boundaries? What is the level of their awareness on, and involvement in, social issues? Have they initiated any action on such issues? To what extent have they been able to influence government development programmes and leverage government development funds? How effective is the apex body in solving problems and resolving conflicts? What is the extent of networking among groups and have they formed alliances with larger movements, political or social?

## Sustainability

To what extent are the existing groups sustainable in the long term? How autonomous are they in their functioning? Have they been able to acquire the necessary skills and capability for self-management? Do they have the capacity to mobilise resources and become economically independent?

## Role of the NGO

What role has the NGO played in promoting community organisation and how has this role changed over time? Are NGO objectives, activities, policies, programmes, procedures, and organisational culture consistent with the goals of community organisation? Is there a concept of withdrawal and a time frame for the same?

# 2. Methodology

The study was conducted largely through two visits (four-five days each) to each of the selected organisations between September and December 1993. Prior to these visits, project documents of the three NGOs available with ACTIONAID were perused to become familiar with their projects.

Visits to the projects were informal. They were essentially to obtain a first hand account from various participants, within the NGO and the people's organisation, of the historical evolution of the process of community organisation, the underlying concepts and principles that have guided decisions and action at various points of time, and views of the future based on cumulative experience and insights that have been gained.

In-depth, open-ended interviews and discussions with selected individuals and groups was the main approach used, supported by observation and reference to project reports and records. Key persons interviewed were: the Chief Functionary of the NGO, the Project Co-ordinator (if not the same person), the core team, the Sector Manager (Group Organisation) and his team of staff down to the village level, and female staff whose work impinged on women in the community. The views of the Regional Managers and Programme Officers of ACTIONAID on what they considered to be the strengths and

weakness of each case were also obtained. The former Director of ASHA was interviewed to tap his knowledge of the organisation.

At the community level, sangha members (both men and women) and leaders at various levels of the people's organisation - village, cluster, and apex - were spoken to individually and in small groups. In the short time available, as many sanghas as possible - good, average and poor - were visited. Meetings of sanghas and the apex bodies were attended to observe how groups conduct their affairs and what issues predominate at these meetings. Existing facts and figures relating to the NGO and its work were obtained and used where necessary. Two documents that were particularly helpful were the Mid-term Review and Future Perspective reports of ASHA and GRAM.

Methods such as the administration of questionnaires and surveys were deliberately not used as they were considered inappropriate to the nature of the study, which was essentially exploring the process of a complex social phenomena.

## 3. Report Structure

The introduction (Chapter I) explains the purpose of the exercise, the methodology and the structure of the report. An overview (Chapter II) of community organisation comes next and is an attempt to draw out the parameters of the concept based on a limited literature review (very little seems to exist on community organisation in contrast to the profusion of literature on 'participation') and on experience - NGO experiences and the consultant's own experience in promoting people's organisations in Orissa.

The three cases - ACCORD, ASHA and GRAM - are presented in the Chapter III as a somewhat straightforward description of who the clients are, the environment within which each NGO operates, the objectives of community organisation, strategies used, the structure and functioning of the people's organisation, involvement of the poor and of women, the present status and future directions.

In Chapter IV each case is analysed in terms of factors which are seen to have enabled or inhibited the process of community organisation at the level of the community and the external environment, and in terms of the key dimensions outlined in the study.

Finally, some significant learnings that may be derived from the experiences under study are presented in the last chapter (Chapter V).

# CHAPTER II

## COMMUNITY ORGANISATION - AN OVERVIEW

### 1. Brief History of Community Organisation

Community Organisation has its roots in the community development movement which dates back to the 1920s. A successful pilot project in Etawah district of Uttar Pradesh in 1948, initiated a chain of events that brought the movement into prominence.

The project's initial results were so impressive that in 1952 the Indian Government decided to incorporate the approach as a Community Development Program (CDP) to upgrade agriculture, health, education and infrastructure in rural areas with the help of a large amount of U.S. aid. In addition, the CDP was to "initiate and direct a process of integrated culture change aimed at transforming the social and economic life of the villages" (Dube 1958).

While the Indian Government was attempting to spread CDP across the entire country, aid agencies were promoting community development internationally. This led to a massive wave of community development programmes across Asia, Africa and Latin America and ultimately more than sixty countries initiated such programmes. However, the popularity of community development was relatively short-lived. By the late 1950s disconcerting reports of the results of CDP in India were being published and soon the same were mirrored in other countries as well. Two major criticisms of CDP were firstly that it was inefficient in economic terms and, secondly, that the benefits which did accrue fell largely into the hands of more affluent farmers.

Many of the problems that brought CDP into disrepute arose out of the inadequacy of the concept of 'community' that underpinned these initiatives, a concept that stereotyped rural communities as 'simple, homogeneous, harmonious and relatively autonomous'.

The unsatisfactory results of community development strategies elicited a variety of responses from those concerned with development policies. For some aid agencies it led to emphasis on blue-print approaches to development planning by technical specialists who paid scant attention to local organisational issues. For a second group, notably the neo-Marxist scholars of the 1970s, the failure of 'improvement' approaches provided further evidence that only radical change, sweeping away the existing social structures, could create the conditions under which development could occur. For a third group, the experiences of community development provided lessons on which new and potentially more successful experiments could be based. (Paper on Social Organisation and Development, details unknown).

## 2. What Is a Community ?

The term 'community' itself normally means a geographic community, a group of people living in the same geographic area such as a village or an urban slum. It may also mean a functional community such as an ethnic or occupational group whose members interact but do not live in the same geographic area. In all cases, members of the community are people who have a common identity, one that distinguishes them from members of other communities.

## 3. Which Communities do we Mean?

Large parts of rural and urban India are sharply polarised between the 'rich' and the 'poor', the 'elites' and the 'ordinaries' and other such dual categories. It is the communities of the poor, the economically, socially and otherwise deprived people that are our point of focus and concern.

In fact, it may be argued that it is better to talk of group organisation and people's organisation rather than community organisation for, as we very well know, a village or a community is a hotbed of conflicting interests. Even the poor are not free of class, caste, religious, ethnic and regional differences.

## 4. What is Community Organisation?

Community Organisation may be simply defined as "the process and structures through which members of a community are, or become, organised to participate in the development process" (Goldbury, 1985).

When viewed as a process, community organisation is a sequence of steps whereby members of a community come together on their own initiative or that of others. As a structure it refers to a group of community members that work together for common goals.

Stan Thekaekara of ACCORD defines it more pertinently as "solely the organisation of the economically, socially and otherwise deprived people to effectively demand and get their basic, human, constitutional, legal and other rights, to bring about changes in their lives so that they may participate in society as equal partners" (Thekaekara, 1991). Over the years several approaches and definitions of community organisation have evolved. Some of the more important ones are presented below:

### a) Community Organisation as Existing Community Structure:

In the broadest sense, community organisation means the social, economic, political and cultural structure and systems that exist within a given community.

### b) Community Organisation as Externally Initiated Process:

Among projects and programmes initiated and funded by agencies external to the local

community, community organisation usually refers to the act of organising community members under the guidance of 'community organisers' or NGO personnel from outside the community. This is the approach or definition usually used by voluntary organisations. While the philosophy expressed may state that the organisational process should be stimulated to occur through a 'bottom up' approach, in actual practice, the initiative, overall management and criteria for judging progress and success come from outside the community.

## c) Community Organisation as Internally Initiated Process:

This approach is based on the philosophy that communities must identify their own wants and needs and cooperate to satisfy them. Project activities develop as discussion in communities is encouraged, and progresses to focus on the real concerns of the people. If persons outside the community are involved in this process, they serve only as facilitators or 'teacher-learners'.

Often the terms 'community organisation' and 'community participation' are used loosely and interchangeably. While historically both terms have their origin in community development, they are in fact different phenomena. Community participation is the actual taking part or involvement of community members in the process and structures of community organisation; it is essential to participatory organisation. Experience has shown that community organisation is more difficult than community participation. Sustaining the broad participation of the membership in the organisation is vital to its health.

Another concept that is central to the debate on community participation and organisation is that of 'empowerment'. No single definition of this concept does it justice. It implies, as suggested by Paul (1987), "equal sharing of power, thereby increasing the political awareness and strength of weaker groups and augmenting their influence over the processes and outcomes of development".

In short, community organisation provides the structure and forum wherein people can participate. Everyone's participation is essential for good or participatory organisation. Participation and organisation are the means by which the poor are empowered to take control and change the forces that impact upon their lives. In turn, empowered people participate more effectively, resulting in a more dynamic organisation. The cycle goes on. Each of these concepts are interdependent.

## 5. Why Community Organisation ?

The last two decades have witnessed a groundswell of developmental and transformative action throughout India in response as it were to the failure of state sponsored developmental plans and measures to benefit the poor and the disadvantaged - in most cases the scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, dalits, bonded labour and women.

The protagonists and their responses present a fascinating kaleidoscope. The sensitised and radicalised youth of the seventies, many of whom bore allegiance to Marx, Gandhi or Jayaprakash, and the more newly arrived development professionals constitute the two ends of the spectrum on the actors front. No less varied are their interpretations of the causes of underdevelopment and the interventions thereof.

Broadly three frameworks are discernible in the plethora of experience that exists:

The first focuses on the formation of village groups around one or more activity. These groups serve as an effective mechanism of efficient delivery and utilisation of services and NGO inputs and are essentially instrumental and apolitical in nature. Beneficiary organisation is used essentially as an instrument to increase a project's effectiveness and sustainability. This is typical of large sectoral projects which are often also funded bilaterally.

The second framework is largely concerned with the immediate problems of the poor. Such projects do not demand any significant change in the structures and systems that breed poverty. The approach here is non-confrontational and the nature essentially reformistic. Strategies to gain a bigger share of the development cake through intermediation with the bureaucracy are characteristic of this framework. This task is made easier in India today by the existence of policies and schemes to ameliorate poverty and the generally co-operative relationship that exists between the government and NGOs. The system provides the space and the scope for social action that emanates from this perspective and even tolerates criticism so long as it is kept within limits. This is the prevailing perspective and most NGO work in India today would probably find a place in this framework. NGOs in India today seem to have moved away from political issues towards economic development activities as if acting on the premise that nothing can be done to transform existing inequalities without changing the income levels of the poor.

The third framework is more radical and is about social transformation. It addresses and seeks to change existing structures and systems - political, economic, social and cultural - that are the root cause of inequality and its resultant effects. Situational social analysis, consciousness-raising and mobilisation, unionisation, struggle, capacity-building and forming alliances are hallmarks of this frame.

The poor come together along class, caste, or ethnic lines to resist and confront local elites and the micro-mechanisms of the structures of power and oppression that are manifest at the local level and to effectively demand and get their basic rights. The goal is empowerment as a process of creating incremental change from below.

Such social action is described by Kothari (1984) as "non-governmental, non-party organisation that attempts to open alternative political spaces outside the usual arenas of party and government though not outside the state". Such groups have been further distinguished into two types depending on the modalities of transformation they employ,

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namely, 'harmony' or 'conflict'; as 'alternative development oriented' or 'struggle oriented'. The former concentrates on development oriented activities to enable self-reliant development of the marginalised and is more in tune with the second framework. The latter assists in organising concrete struggles in local situations and is more likely to describe itself as a people's organisation or movement for social change, rather than community organisation, which semantically speaking is a less radical term.

## 6. Factors that Affect Community Organisation

Organisation does not occur in a vacuum. It is a complex process which is susceptible, in both a positive and negative way, to a whole range of influences which are worth considering. Broadly, these influences stem from within the people, and from without, i.e. the environment. A third set of factors related to the NGO, which may be described as operational, may also be included.

### a) Factors Within the Community

On the positive side, communal traditions of cooperative work and leadership, if they exist in a community, can become the basis for organisation, or at least constitute the first step.

A 'readiness for change' in the community as a result of exposure to developments beyond the limits of their village through some modernising force as, for example, the mass media, can be a positive stimulant.

The economic and social composition of the community has a direct bearing upon organisation building. The greater the homogenity the greater the likelihood of success. As communities are usually not undifferentiated in many respects, a sensitive analysis of the dynamics of rural differentiation and competing groups is necessary in order to identify the basis for group homogenity.

A culture of silence and a mentality of dependence is often characteristic of the poor. They tend to accept the *status quo* and their position in a framework in which social arrangements maintain the control of the few and the exclusion of the majority (Oakley 1987). This can be a powerful deterrent to organisation.

### b) Factors External to the Community

The nature of the external environment indicates the potential for meaningful involvement of the poor in the democratic process, and has an important bearing on the process of organisation. What is important is an in-depth understanding of the environment, in order to determine strategies and approaches that optimise opportunities and minimise threats.

An environment which is democratic is likely to allow for poor people to participate in the structure of government and to encourage them to develop their own participatory intiatives. Official policy pronouncements, however, are often not consistent with ground

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realities. Despite the gap between policy and practice, the existence of a favourable policy provides scope for developing beneficial strategies.

Generally, the socio-political environment is an obstacle to developing organisations of the poor, the basic rationale of which is to challenge entrenched interests through the collectivised strength of the poor and wrest a better deal for themselves. This process is bound to conflict with the *status quo*. Three areas in which these conflicts may become particularly problematic are the political, the legal and the bureaucratic.

## Political

Organisations are a source of power, and the main purpose of community organisation is often to build the power of the poor. The potential for conflict is self-evident and any community organisation activity should be carried out recognising that if the group begins to take on political characteristics there is likely to be a backlash which may result in withdrawal of official recognition, loss of resources or even physical coercion.

Two contrasting strategies for dealing with this problem are:

a)    To gain the protection of a strong political party by working with it. However, in situations where the party in power changes frequently, such political affiliation may be inappropriate and even dangerous.

b)    To avoid political identity as much as possible.

Insulating the community organisation from mainstream politics is tricky. An effective group is likely to develop political aspirations in the protection of its members' interest. Avoiding political identification, however, may be necessary, at least until the organisation is strong enough to withstand the consequences.

## Legal

Very often the poor are unaware of their legal rights, as a result of which they do not benefit from the law. The legal system is also inherently biased in the way it is implemented and the way in which it maintains the *status quo*.

## Bureaucracy

Be it at the level of structure, policy, procedure or attitude, the nature of the bureaucracy is essentially inimical to the poor, and more particularly to organisations of the poor. This calls for identifying and befriending more friendly bureaucrats and of devising strategies to overcome bureaucratic inertia or hostility.

### c) Operational Factors

The nature of the external intervention through the instrument of the 'project' has, perhaps, the most powerful impact on the process of organisation. Within this impact, the issue of organisational congruence is at the heart of the matter.

Humanistic, democratic, non-authoritarian, participative project management, philosophy and structure would be more conducive to successful organisation than the antithesis. Such organisations empower their people to empower clients.

## 7. Phases in Community Organisation

Three phases are seen to exist in the course of community organisation which may be described as initial, intermediate and principal.

In the initial phase, the task is, first, to build confidence and establish rapport with the client community, through informal visits and loosely structured meetings. This takes time, a year at least. What are the major problems and needs? Who are the leaders and how do they lead? What is the structure and system of decision-making? How are the structures of power manifested locally? Later in this phase, objectives and strategies must be determined.

In the next phase - the intermediate phase - the main tasks are of structuring the organisation, building solidarity and ensuring internal participation. Will the organisation be informal or formal? What should be the size of the area or population to be covered? Who will be the leaders? How will they be selected? What will their responsibilities be? What training will they require?

In the principal phase, the organisation which has been structured becomes more formalised, begins to act independently and establishes external contacts. However, it must be appropriately supervised and supported and its performance monitored and evaluated.

## 8.Conscientisation, Mobilisation and Organisation

Another way of defining the phases or stages of community organisation is that of conscientisation, mobilisation and organisation. These are three principles and tasks of advancing a people's organisation. While each is distinct in itself or requires a distinct work emphasis, the three phases complement each other as a dialectical triad.

Paulo Freire and Saul Alinsky - although their work dates back to the sixties and seventies - are two of the best known theoreticians and activists of 'social change' and 'social movements' in Latin America and the United States of America, respectively. No study on community organisation would be complete without reference to them.

Freire is best known for his theory of conscientisation, a theory of education of the oppressed, while Alinsky's contribution was the strategy of organising. Both proposed that the process of community organisation begin with a stage of investigation of the communities by the external interventionists or agents. The main goal of Alinsky's social research was to make an investigation of problems besetting the community through interaction. Freire's investigation was a little more comprehensive, yet essentially the same. Both targeted identification of problems as the main objective of investigation; both used the

community's perception of their problems as the principal, if not only, source of knowledge about social conditions. Both did not seek to establish the complex historic dynamic that gave rise to the problems, nor did they identify the fundamentally antagonistic social interests behind the immediate expressions of the contradiction. In reality, this meant that identification of problems and needs was not an objective process but rather a highly subjective one, which drew on the present level of perception of those trapped in oppressive situations. This approach disregarded how perceptions are influenced and distorted by the media and by the prevailing ideology in society.

Freire conceived of social change exclusively through a change in consciousness. He did not concern himself with what political forces were really needed for such transformation. His basic concern was to break the oppressed out of the culture of silence and fatalism, to demonstrate their ability to create culture, and ultimately to create a humanised society.

For Alinsky, the reflection or evaluation process at the end of an action was simply to identify the mistakes the group made in the execution of the action itself. There was no attempt to evaluate whether the issue chosen was historically relevant or what strategic implications the action would have for building the people's movement.

Both Freire and Alinsky are essentially reformists, which is not to downplay reform. The struggle for reform is necessary as it links the immediate problems of the poor with the need for systematic transformation of an unjust society. Reform which stops short and is happy with secondary improvements in people's lives without addressing the systemic nature of underdevelopment is what is untenable.

Alinsky, as was said earlier, provided the main 'organising' strategy for intervening in communities. His own practice related to working class communities in the United States. He addressed immediate vital problems such as water, health services, etc. The community organisation would mobilise and organise the community in search of a resolution that would improve the daily life of the people. If the people's organisation managed to hold together and actually reach its goal, the next step in the strategy would be to tackle another similar issue and then on to the next. Hypothetically, each victory would generate a stronger and broader people's organisation which over time would be powerful enough to negotiate with the local powers. At this stage, the organisation would be able to build alliances with similar organisations in the immediate region to further enhance the people's ability to improve their lives.

This approach often generated a constant search for victories in order to keep the people enthusiastic and in motion. Whether the victories were symbolic, hollow or fundamental did not matter. And in the search for victories, the community organisation was not able to establish a strategic coherence between one issue and the next. There was no clear strategy as to how the first victory would lay the political, organisational and ideological groundwork for tackling more fundamental problems.

Alinsky is criticised for viewing political life as static, conceiving of struggle strictly in tactical terms, and for creating unrealistic expectations. Without a solid grasp of social theory and an understanding of the dynamics of social development, the masses were led with short-term, narrow solutions that did not qualitatively improve their situation. Activists were brought into political life with a hollow understanding of society, no strategic framework, an individual (rather than group) consciousness, and a focus on immediate problems. The results showed in narrow reformist activities that were incapable of producing significant changes in the structures of exploitation.

## 9. Community Organisation and Sustainability

The creation of a sustainable process of development is the underlying rationale of community organisation. This implies that the organisation must itself be sustainable. Ideally for an organisation to be sustainable it should develop into an institution.

Uphoff (1986) defines an institution as a "complex of norms and behaviors that persist over time by serving collectively valued purposes". He goes on to say that, to the extent that an organisation has acquired special status and legitimacy for satisfying people's needs and meeting their normative expectations over time, the organisation may be said to have become `institutionalised'. Not all organisations are institutions; nor are all institutions organisations.

Another notion, that is closely linked to sustainability of a community organisation, is that of self-reliance. Self-reliance does not mean autarky. Self-reliant development of a people includes development with external resources. Self-reliance is not a set of constant relationships between a people and the intervening organisation. It is instead a relationship which unfolds with time and is characterised, at points, even by dependence of a critical nature. Such dependence, if continued indefinitely, aborts the emergence of self-reliance; but if used purposefully to raise people's own capacities, it may progressively enhance self-reliance.

The capacities an organisation would need to sustain itself are, broadly, the capacity of self management and of financial self-sufficiency.

The institutionalisation of collective reflection as a method of progressively developing people's critical consciousness or intellectual self-reliance is also essential to community organisation. Such processes of critical self-enquiry may not immediately emerge from the people, and this is not due to any inherent incapacity to think critically, however 'illiterate' they may be. This process must be stimulated by appropriate means and is one of the most important roles of external interventionists. Without this intellectual dimension, self-reliance of the people can only be a narrow management notion, subject to manipulation by those who would enjoy the monopoly of social knowledge.

## 10. Community Organisation and Women

An overview of some of the issues and concepts underlying women and their development will be useful in looking critically at what community organisation means for women in ASHA, GRAM and ACCORD. It will help us gain some insights into how our perspectives and strategies for empowering women in organisations can be improved.

To begin with, the term 'gender' has almost replaced the term 'women'. The underlying vision and perspectives of the terms are very different. The concept of gender can be discussed at two levels - descriptive and analytical. At the descriptive level, gender refers to the social differences between men and women; sex being the term used to describe the biological differences. In contrast to the latter, social differences vary with class, caste, ethnicity, religion, age and time. Further, being socially defined, the construction of gender in society can be changed. At an analytical level, gender refers to the political point that the problem in women's development is not women, but the socially constructed power relationship between men and women which subordinates women. (Whitehead, 1979).

The Women In Development (WID) concept and approaches (anti-poverty, efficiency, and equity) have come under severe criticism by women from the developing world. Firstly, for attempting to integrate women into mainstream development, which is itself being seriously questioned. Secondly, for focusing on women's participation as an instrument of effectiveness in projects rather than on women's oppression. Thirdly, for perceiving women to be, in many ways, themselves the problem in their development (illiteracy, low skills, etc.). Fourthly, for using a top-down approach to deliver equity through pro-women policy and legislative changes and, finally, for emphasising the 'public' (health, education, employment, etc.) but not 'private' oppression and insubordination of women.

The 'gender approach' to women's development emerged from the critique of WID approaches. It emphasises 1) the need to redefine women's development from a gender perspective, 2) that patriarchy must be dismantled to transform gender relations, 3) that the personal is the political. The empowerment of women and conscientisation of men are essential for change. Related jargon, in use today, differentiates between Gender in Development (GID) and Gender and Development (GAD), with the former seeking to integrate gender analysis in projects to improve efficiency, and the latter seeking to integrate a gender perspective to empower women.

Against this conceptual backdrop we examine community organisation as carried out by ACCORD, ASHA and GRAM to see, if women have been included in the organisation of the poor and if so, the perspective with which this has happened. Creating a separate space for women to meet and understand themselves and not merely to pursue an economic activity is a pre-requisite to women's empowerment. Another key indicator of gender sensitive community organisation is the attitudes and skills of the staff who promote organisation.

# CHAPTER III

## CASE STUDIES

## ACCORD

Action for Community Organisation Rehabilitation and Development (ACCORD) came into being in November 1985. It is registered as a society. Stan and Mari Thekaekara as Secretary/Director and Assistant Director/Treasurer respectively are the prime movers of the organisation since its inception. As students they were both actively involved in the All India Catholic University Federation (AICUF). Stan has worked with the Ho tribals in Singhbum district of Bihar (1974-77), and later in Divi Taluk of Andhra Pradesh in relief. In 1983 he joined the Nilgiri Adivasi Welfare Association (NAWA) as Community Development Officer in-charge of NAWA's Paniya Rehabilitation farm in Kayuani. It is here that Stan and Mari became aware of the wretchedness of the tribals of the Gudalur block. Finding inadequate scope in NAWA to respond to the complex tribal situation they decided to quit and start an independent organisation to work with the tribals in Gudalur.

The initial team consisted of Stan, Mari and Subramanyam, a local Moolakurumba youth whom Stan and Mari had befriended while they were working with NAWA. Soon other tribals joined the team. From the start ACCORD has deliberately chosen to recruit local tribals to work in the organisation as a result of which all the field staff are tribal. The few non-tribals are to be found in administrative and support roles. ACCORD came into existence to support the tribals of Gudalur. It has attempted over the years to stay as true as possible to its vision and mission.

ACCORD has a non-hierarchical structure. It functions with an unusual degree of democracy through a variety of teams. The project is grouped into five areas on the basis of geography. Each area has a team consisting of :

- one area coordinator as the team leader.

- village animators, who are full time and cover three to four habitations (there are about 28 animators and area coordinators).

- health workers and health animators (about 60).

- part-time livestock field workers (about 8) and full time assistants.

- tutorial, GTR schools and preparatory school teachers (about 33) plus two coordinators.

Centrally, three teams support the area teams.

**1. A Senior Management Support Team:**

This consists of:

- The Project Director who supports the animators team.

- An Assistant Project Director (honorary) who oversees the administration and is responsible for documentation.

- Health Directors (2) who support the health workers.

- Director Education(1) who supports the teachers.

- Veterinary Doctor (1) who supports the livestock field workers.

- Advocate.

**2. Taluk Committee:**

The taluk committee consists of 7 tribals who have proven leadership abilities and have been associated with ACCORD for a long time.

**3. Administrative Team:**

Administrator, accountant, account assistant, office assistant, computer programmer, drivers.

## The Area

Gudalur is one of four blocks in the Nilgiris district of Tamilnadu. It shares borders with Karnataka on the north-east and Kerala on the south-west. Ooty, the district headquarters is 30 miles away. The extremely hilly terrain with a heavy and prolonged rainy season makes the area a planter's paradise. Coffee, pepper and tea are the favoured species, grown on very small to very large plantations. Tea factories abound and so does employment; and, even if it is only seasonal, the wages are relatively good.

Until the turn of the century, the area was densely forested and sparsely populated by tribals and an indigenous landowning people called Chettys. Some estates have been in existence since early British times. Soon after Independence land-hungry Malayali settlers from neighbouring Kerala invaded Gudalur in large numbers. The 80s brought an influx of Sri Lankan repatriates into the district.

The block comprises seven revenue villages spread over an area of 414. 2117 sq.kms of which 67% is under forest cover. The Mudhumalai wildlife sanctuary borders the block. The appalling state of the roads, the inhospitable terrain and dispersed nature of tribal settlements make this a very difficult area to work in.

## The Tribals

ACCORD estimates that there are about 35,000 tribals living in Gudalur taluk. These tribals belong to five major tribal groups - the Paniyas (the largest), the Kattunaickans, the Bettakurumbas, the Moolakurumbas and the Irulas. All five tribes are classified as primitive by the Government of India, the credit for which goes to ACCORD. Each of the five tribes of Gudalur have somewhat distinct backgrounds and characteristics. They speak various dialects of Tamil, Malayalam and Kannada. Presented here is a summarised background of their situation.

The available history of the tribals is oral and goes back to only as far as the period of their bondage to Chetty landlords. Old land transaction records point to a flourishing slave trade in nearby Wynad where Paniyas and Kattunaickans who had been caught in the forests were sold into slavery.

The tribal saga of deprivation and suffering began with the invasion of their traditional homelands - the forests - from around the early 19th century by first the British colonialists, then the Indian State and later, by land-hungry settlers from Kerala. From a life of complete freedom and abundance in the forests in a spirit of community the tribals increasingly came under the yoke of the Chettys who trapped them in a pernicious system of bonded labour. The ones to suffer the bonded labour system the most were the Paniyas and the Kattunaickans and to a lesser extent the Bettakurumbas. The Moolakurumbas escaped this system of bondage because they were the only ones to take to settled agriculture on lands they received as a reward from the British for opening up a path from the Kerala coast to Seringapatnam. As a result they are comparatively better off than the other tribes.

The Irulas have a completely different history from the other four tribes. Their entry into the area is comparatively recent. Truly speaking they are not tribals but a caste called Soligas who have inadvertently been scheduled as tribes.

Malayali Christian settlers who poured into the area in the 50s and 60s completely changed the social and economic configuration of the place. They befriended the tribals in many ways and succeeded in breaking down the bonded labour system - not for altruistic reasons but because they needed cheap labour to open up more land for themselves. Before long the tribals were inexorably indebted to the Chetans (as the Christian Malayalis are called) through liquor, the tea shop, and many more ingenuous ways. The Chetans took over whatever little the tribals owned, particularly land, in default of repayment.

As Stan writes in a paper on *Emerging Cultural Groups - Tribals*, "this was the situation when my wife Mari and I arrived in the Nilgiris to work with the tribals in 1984. Impoverished, indebted, their lands alienated, afraid, scattered and their entire social fabric in tatters. All of them waging a daily battle for survival". The tribals were the 'kattu jathi', the

uncivilised people from the jungle whose dress, appearance, language and customs were looked down upon by the local mainstream to a point where it hurt the most - their self-image and identity. They were educationally ill-equipped (31% of the tribals have acquired learning largely upto the primary level; less than 0.5% have had university education) to face their hostile environment.

## Vision and Goals

ACCORD is fueled by a vision of the tribals (a people with so much to give to the rest of the world in terms of life sustaining values and traditions) participating in mainstream society with self-respect (presently eroded) and respect from others (as opposed to existing revilement and devaluation), receiving their legitimate share of development and contributing in turn to the reordering of development goals and processes.

ACCORD's goal is to provide the tribals with support and guidance to evaluate all possible choices affecting their lives and select those that are to their greatest advantage (ACCORD Annual Plan and Budget 1991/92).

## Objectives

In order to assist the tribals to reach the state described above, ACCORD works towards building a strong tribal organisation to strengthen tribal identity and culture, resist non-tribal organisation and increase the bargaining power of the tribals so as to wrest a better deal for themselves.

## Strategy

To build a strong organisation of the tribals, ACCORD uses twin strategies of activism and development. It is constantly challenged in keeping the balance between the two, due to the inherently conflicting nature of these two elements.

### Activism

#### Cultural Revival and Tribal Identity

As regards activism, the emphasis has been of rebuilding positive self-image and pride in being tribal. This serves as a rallying point for developing a strong organisation through which the tribals would protect and advance their interests and participate in the social, economic and political spheres of mainstream society as equal partners.

The rebuilding of a positive self image started with stopping the downslide into disintegration and acculturation that was taking place with alarming rapidity. Cultural activism to revive religious, linguistic, and cultural forms of self-expression has been high on AC-CORD's agenda. A Festival of Tribal Culture, the first of which was held on 10-11 January 1988, is today an annual event that everyone looks forward to; it is an important means by

which the issue of identity and culture is kept alive, aside from regular reinforcement through training and other interactions. Building a strong tribal identify and self image is not simply a part of the stated philosophy and strategy but forms the basis of all that ACCORD does.

## Land: the Key Issue in Organisation Building

From its initial analysis of the tribal situation ACCORD saw land at the heart of the tribal problem in which lay the key to a better future for the tribals. Thus, strategies were evolved to first of all imprint on tribal consciousness the value of land to their well-being. This would lead them to safeguard all existing land, recover lost lands, demand for land allocation to the landless and optimise the productivity of their lands. A Campaign for Tribal Land Rights in 1988 set the ball rolling as it were. Its successful culmination with a historic December 5, 1988 demonstration in Gudalur and submission of a memorandum to the Governor of Tamil Nadu highlighting problems related to land and measures needed for redressal is considered a watershed in the land rights movement. The struggle for land has been a pivotal point of the community organisation building process promoted by ACCORD.

The exercise of collective strength by the tribals, often involving the membership of more than one sangam, to protest and physically resist individual cases of exploitation by local non-tribals has not only enabled tribals to hold on to or regain land but, as importantly, it united the tribals and boosted their confidence and determination to organise.

The arrival of a young, sympathetic & dynamic District Collector in 1990 resulted in concrete gains on the land front for tribals. Possession certificates were issued to all tribals who had land, long-standing land disputes were settled and tribals were allowed to cultivate lands they had traditionally owned but could not cultivate for want of proof. The commissioning of a study on tribal land alienation in Gudalur by the Commission for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (the report of which received attention at the national and state government levels) and the visit of an official committee on Encroach-ment in Hill Areas have given the tribals the courage and impetus they needed to struggle on for small pieces of land that are their best bet for a simple but independent life.

## Using The Law

Another dimension of strategy related to activism that ACCORD has used and continues to use to advantage is legal education and training of sangam leaders on land laws and procedures. Legal aid has been provided to sangam members through a socially-oriented local lawyer who has helped institute and fight legal battles involving land in particular,

## Advocacy and the Media

The well known development adage of 'acting locally and thinking globally' is ingrained in

ACCORD's practice of organisation building. The clever use of the media to capture the attention of audiences far and wide is a strategy that ACCORD has persistently pursued to disseminate information relating to the tribal situation and to lobby and advocate for change. With increasing media coverage, came state recognition at least from the higher levels of power - such as the National Youth Award that Stan received - and brought access to all levels of the bureaucracy and politicians. Another strategic feature that characterises ACCORD is the continuous promotion of the tribals and their collective cause above the glamorisation of individual leaders within ACCORD and the local organisation, which is remarkable given in particular ACCORD's strong and charismatic leadership. When Stan won the National Youth Award, he used the opportunity to take the ACCORD tribal team to Delhi to among other things meet Rajiv Gandhi and some of the 'powers that be' at the expense of the Department of Youth Affairs. Such invaluable exposure is part of an ongoing strategy to build tribal confidence.

## Tribal Institutions and Youth Power

In 1990 two new dimensions were added to the process of consolidating the emerging tribal confidence and bargaining power and the mobilising of tribal youth. The first of the two was the initiation and establishment of permanent tribal institutions such as a hospital, a school, an estate, a tea factory, etc. to be run and managed by the tribals themselves, and which would establish them as a community in their own right.

Out of this decision was born The Gudalur Adivasi Hospital (GAH), an independent entity which consciously attempts to function as a tribal institution and ultimately will be managed entirely by the tribals themselves. Another fledgling institution is the Adivasi Tea Plantation Society.

Tribals in the age group 15 to 25 hitherto had not really been associated with the village sangams, a lacunae that ACCORD is trying to rectify through the formation of youth clubs. Area level recreational centres have been set up to provide a meeting point for young tribals, who will, it is hoped, gradually become part of the sangams and will extend the reach of the existing animators.

## Development

In ACCORD's strategic configuration, development is the flip side of activism, the force that sustains the people and the organisation particularly when burning issues are on the ebb. As Mari Thekaekara writes in *Where the Mind is Without Fear: The Story of ACCORD*, - "what does land in the hands of a penniless Paniya mean, without the resources to develop it? Or, talk of rights of whatever kind to a tribal women who has lost six pregnancies due to anaemia?" And so, ACCORD has run development programmes almost from its inception to boost individual tribal incomes, education and health status.

On the economic front, ACCORD supports tea planting, crop loans, consumption credit (the Adivasi Credit Fund), a scheme to redeem mortgaged land, livestock development, housing and vocational training. Tea planting besides providing tribals with a good, steady income is a political statement that subtly transforms tribals into 'tea planters' the cream of hill society and changes prevailing power equations. As a result of planting tea the tribals have become more conscious of the value of land.

The health intervention is focussed on mother and child care. Tribal women health workers supervised by tribal health animators all of whom are supported by a two member doctor team constitute the health team. ACCORD has been most successful in attracting professionals of the highest calibre to work with the tribals and more so in tempering their professional imperatives in keeping with the goals of the organisation.

The education programme- a late starter- is slowly picking up momentum. ACCORD says it wants more than just a school leaving certificate for the tribal child. The set of programmes currently consists of an intervention in the Government-run Tribal Residential Schools (GTR) through tribal teachers placed there by ACCORD, running nine preparatory learning centres for tribal children, conducting tutorials for class IX & X tribal students and the provision of scholarships to tribal students keen on pursuing higher studies.

## How Community Organisation Began

Mari, Stan and Subramanyam spent the first year moving around and getting to know the people of the taluk. Stan started training young tribals with too little education for a job and too much for coolie work in social analysis. Some of them became the first animators, the "change-agents" in their respective communities, going from village to village to develop among the people an understanding of the causes of their problems and an awareness of the need to unite. By the end of 1986 ACCORD had established the first 3-4 sangams in Erumad area.

As Mari wrote: "...the arduous task of community organisation had begun. The idea of the sangam or village based action group took time for the people to understand. And then one day (January 1988) a landowner wanted to get a tractor down to his paddy field. But Chorian, a Paniya, and his tiny patch of coffee stood in the way. He just had everything cut down along with Chorian's precious coffee. Hundreds had done it before him. But this time there was a difference. Chorian had been to some of the sangam meetings. So, he appealed to them for help. Within hours 200 adivasis arrived. They rebuilt the fence and demanded justice. The police came and restored Chorian's land. A young lawyer filed a suit for damages and for the first time an all powerful landlord was brought to heel. Suddenly it made sense. Unity, strength, the need to organise. All over people started coming together in small groups. And soon tribals were talking of their rights, of their lost lands and of the need to fight for change. The sangam idea had finally caught tribal imagination. Sangams sprang up all over the taluk."

# The Concept, Structure & Functioning of Community Organisation

Organisation building, was initially perceived as bringing tribals together at village level to understand the forces of exploitation and subjugation from within and without in order to act together to challenge these forces and gradually change existing reality at a psychological and material level. The process of organisation building was to progress from village to cluster to block level. The initial conceptualisation of how organisation building would develop was cut short by the tremendous response of the tribals to a Campaign on Land Rights that was organised by ACCORD in 1988. This culminated in a demonstration on December 5, 1988 by more than 10,000 tribals in Gudalur town, the success of which took ACCORD most of all by surprise. Out of this event, came the recognition that the tribals were already identifying with a movement beyond the boundaries of their village sangams, a development which signified the arrival of the organisation at taluk level, something that ACCORD had visualised taking place much later in the process. What took shape out of this realisation was the concept of only one sangam, the Adivasi Munnetra Sangam (AMS) which would function at three levels - the village, the area and the taluk - and that is how the organisation has been built since 1988.

The AMS was formally incorporated as a registered society in June 1991. Only tribals living in Gudalur taluk, and who have come together as a group committed to the ideals of the sangam concept, can be members of the AMS.

## Village Sangams

The village units of the AMS are generally referred to as the village sangams. In 1993 there were 117 village sangams under the AMS with a membership of 3521 males and 3524 females. As per ACCORD's calculation there are about 7000 tribal families spread over 163 villages in Gudalur taluk. ACCORD plans on starting at least 35 new sangams by June 1994 to cover those tribal families who presently are not in the AMS fold.

The village sangams are usually all male in composition. There are, however, some separate women sangams in the Sri Madurai area particularly. The size of a sangam varies. Membership is not constant. Nor, is the membership always active. An event or an issue is known to activate the membership while at other times members may not even attend sangam meetings. ACCORD accepts this phenomenon. In ACCORD's understanding what is important is the full involvement of tribals in issues that concern them. If some tribals are not particularly enamoured by routine sangam matters this is not considered detrimental to the sangams.

As a rule, sangams meet once a month. Today village sangam meetings take place independent of ACCORD. Only the concerned animator may attend. Each member pays a monthly membership of two rupees. Every sangam has a bank account which is operated jointly by the sangam leaders. A cash book and minute book is maintained by one of the

leaders of the sangam with or without the help of the animator. All ACCORD's programmes and activities - economic development, health and education - are implemented through the sangams. The sangam takes all decisions related to loans and expenditure.

## Women Sangams

The first women sangams developed in 1988 around women's protest against illicit liquor brewing. In 1989 given the interest tribal women were evincing in sangams, ACCORD began to rethink the position it had held so far that "tribal women are more equal and less oppressed than the other women" (ACCORD, *Taking Stock* ,3. Jan - June 1989) . Despite this shift in thinking the reality today is that only 10 to 15 women sangams exist out of a total of 117 sangams. Very little has been deliberately done to facilitate the inclusion of women in the AMS as a principle of gender equity. ACCORD has provided the women sangams with very little support to function as a group with special problems, needs and aspirations.Whatever little women's involvement exists is by default and not through deliberate policy and strategic intervention. The staff who are directly engaged in facilitating the tribals to organise are all male.

The main activity in the women sangams is centred around the Adivasi Credit Fund. Women sangams were initially facilitated by male animators. Today they meet on their own.

## The Area Level

The next level of the AMS is the "area" level. Leaders from each village form the area committee. In 1993 there were eight areas - Erumad, Ayankolly, Bithukad, Pattavayal, Devala, Gudalur, Padanthorai and Sri Madurai. Each area has rented a room in a central village to serve as the office.The rent of the area office was initially paid from membership subscription but as the AMS is hard put to keep these offices going from its own funds, ACCORD now pays for the rent of these offices. Every area office proudly displays an AMS board.

The area committee meets once in three months or, as and when necessary to discuss issues and programmes of common concern. The area level of the AMS came into existence later than the village and the taluk level. It was a weak point in the organisation for some years. This has changed today; fairly strong leadership exists at this level as well.

## The Taluk Level

Each area committee selects five leaders to represent it on the the taluk commitee which in late 1993 comprised 40 members. The office bearers of the AMS are elected once in three years by the taluk committee. The election of village and area leaders is less regular.

The taluk committee of the AMS oversees the functioning of the village units and the area committees. It plays a supportive role vis-a-vis these levels. The other important function of the taluk committee is public liaison. Taluk leaders keep in touch with relevant

departments of the government at taluk, district and state levels. It was this committee that spearheaded the preparation of an exhaustive "Master Plan for the Development of Tribals in Gudalur Taluk" at the behest of the State Tribal Welfare Department. Another recent AMS victory was in persuading the Tamilnadu Minister for SC/STs to visit some tribal villages in the taluk.

The AMS addresses tribal problems and needs at the cultural, social and economic level. At the socio-cultural level a multiplicity of efforts have been afoot to refurbish tribal pride and to build unity among the five tribes of Gudalur on the basis of their common tribal identity. The AMS-ACCORD combine has succeeded in large measure on this count. Today the tribals of Gudalur are a confident , self-respecting people who interface with local society as equals, with far greater confidence than in the past. They seem to be transacting with mainstream society as a people proud of their tribal identity and not forgetful of it.

On the economic front efforts have been three-pronged. On the one hand the organisation has been continuously acting through the assertion of numerical strength and legal measures to put a stop to all cases of local exploitation and land grabbing by non-tribals as a result of which, the incidence of exploitation by local non-tribals has reduced considerably.

The second level at which the organisation acts to protect and promote the economic interests of its members is at the level of policy formulation and implementation through lobbying with the bureaucracy and political leaders and using the media to draw public attention and support for their cause.

The third approach has been through the implementation of economic measures to improve income from land and to reduce indebtedness. The economic situation of the tribals has improved considerably over the last seven years through the combined measures detailed above.

It has been ACCORD's thinking for a few years now that the AMS should focus on the organising tasks - conscientisation, sangam building, responding to individual cases of exploitation , etc - while ACCORD would cater to the developmental needs of the tribals. This division of roles and labour between ACCORD and the AMS has not really materialised. The AMS and ACCORD are intrinsically linked by the fact that most of ACCORD's staff are tribal, all of whom are also members of the AMS and to a great extent provide the AMS with its leadership at various levels. ACCORD however, despite this situation, consciously tries to ensure that the decision-making process is controlled by the sangam leaders and not by its tribal staff.

On the financial front, the AMS today is dependent in large measure on funds from ACCORD to meet expenditure such as office rent and so forth. In 1993 ACCORD equipped all the AMS offices with basic furniture and equipment. Since then it also pays the rent of the taluk and area offices. Both ACCORD and AMS recognise that the AMS

must have its own infrastructure and regular source of funds to ensure its autonomy and sustainability as an organisation.

The strategy that has been adopted to improve the financial base of the AMS is to develop permanent crops on lands donated by the villages to provide the AMS with a regular income. In 1993 ACCORD allocated Rs. 75,000/- to develop 2.5 acres of pepper, 4.5 acres of citrinella and 1 acre of ginger in 4 AMS areas. It is expected that the returns from these plantations will be enough to make the AMS financially independent of ACCORD.

Both ACCORD and AMS have begun to plan for the day when AMS will function completely on its own. The process of pull out is likely to take a minimum of 3 years i.e. 1996. Details of "when and how" are still under discussion. Pull out or withdrawal by ACCORD is a well acknowledged and accepted eventuality by both partners. The tribals are confident of running their own organisation.

In the recent past, the entire work of ACCORD and AMS was reviewed and future directions chalked out first with the central team and the taluk level committee and later with the sangam leaders areawise. A process of decentralisation is underway as part of the process of ACCORD's withdrawal. In 1993 each area made its own plans and budgets. In 1994 the process is being taken one step further by allocating a budget to each area to be independently managed by it.

While the AMS participates in tribal gatherings across the country now and again, it has not entered into alliance with any organisation. Currently, it is engaged in countering the negative propaganda of another tribal organisation that has emerged in Gudalur taluk, a development which does not augur well for the tribals and is a sad reflection of the competition which now plagues NGOs.

## ASHA

The Association of Social and Humanitarian Action of India or ASHA as it is commonly known was founded in 1980 at Vijayawada by R.S. Sharat, a young post graduate in social work.

ASHA believes that the development of man is more important than material development and that this development can only come about by people's participation at every stage of the development process, a process that must have a strong economic grounding and be self-reliant and self-sustaining. The organisation of the poor is essential to this process.

In 1983, ASHA chose the Mylavaram block in Krishna district of Andhra Pradesh to become operational. Initially ten villages towards the northern end of the block bordering on Khammam district were chosen for their backwardness, contiguity and accessibility.

In 1993 ASHA worked in 25 villages spread over three of the four mandals of Mylavaram taluk namely Mylavaram, G. Konduru and Reddigudem. It has a well-developed but

modest field office near Kuntamukkala village, which is about 40 kms from Vijayawada city, where ASHA has always had its head office.

R.S. Sudhir who was ASHA's Assistant Executive Director for several years is now at the helm of the organisation.

The project is implemented by a field team consisting of a husband & wife team of Community Development Promoters (CDPs) at village level, Area Coordinators at cluster level, and Sector Managers.

The operational area of the project is divided into three clusters The project itself is divided into 5 sectors: Group Organisation, Agriculture, Income Generation, Education and Health. A Women's Development Coordinator (WDC) oversees the thrift programme. The Sector Managers - Group Organisation, Agriculture and Income Generation, Education and Health - report to the Director.

In late 1993 ASHA was in the throes of withdrawing itself from the area after almost a decade of credible and concerted work that has brought visible social and economic change into the lives of 1400-odd families. It can afford to withdraw because the organisation of the people it has created in the form of 27 sanghas and a federation of these sanghas called the Ikya Sangha Samiti is confident of sustaining the development process, a confidence that is rooted in the experience of standing together against many odds.

## The Project Setting

In the early 80s Mylavaram positioned as it is in the upland belt of Krishna district was a backward area in a prosperous region. Krishna district was one of the first parts of Andhra Pradesh to come under British rule, a historical fact that has influenced its growth and development. Later the area came under Communist influence.

The area is predominantly rural and the economy agricultural. Mandal statistics of 1985 reveal that 25% of the population are cultivators and 56% agricultural labourers; 54% own less that 1 acre and 6.5% are completely landless. In ASHA's operational villages which are the poorest in the taluk, landlessness is much higher at 31.36% of target families; 68.34% have less than 1 acre of land. The principal crops grown are paddy, jowar. groundnut,chilly, tomato, pulses and more recently mango. Drylands are being increasingly converted into mango orchards on account of high returns.

About 9.8% and 4.8% of the district's population is scheduled caste and tribal respectively. Of the 25 villages that ASHA works in 14 are completely scheduled caste, 5 are mixed villages and 6 are scheduled tribe settlements called "thandas". The scheduled castes belong to two groups - the Malas and the Madiga, many of whom are Christian. The Vaddera, Golla, and Gowda constitute the backward castes. The upper or landowning class is made up of Kammas and Reddys. Some of the dehumanising manifestations of

the caste system are less in evidence today but the fact that the scheduled castes prefer to build their houses apart from the rest of the village bears witness to the deep divide that continues to exist. While ASHA has chosen its target group strictly on the basis of economic criteria, scheduled caste families predominate.

The tribals belong to the "Lambadi" or "Sugali" tribe but unlike the rest of this tribe which is primarily nomadic, the Lambadi tribe in Mylavaram taluk have settled down to agriculture and small animal keeping. The women continue to wear their colourful traditional dress.

The size of a mixed caste village ranges from 800-1200 households while a tribal thanda would have between 50-150 households. The lack of homestead land is a major problem in this area. The overall literacy rate of the area is 28%. However, within the target group literacy particularly female literacy would be well below these aggregated figures.

Communications, particularly roads, have improved over the years thanks to a local MLA becoming the Minister of Public Works in the mid-80s.

The area has undergone considerable change in the last five years, The availability of free irrigation from the left canal of the Nagarjuna Sagar has sent land prices soaring from about Rs 8,000 an acre of mango orchard in the early 80s to close to Rs 100,000 in 1993. In general, income levels have risen significantly for all income groups, particularly for wage labourers - a phenomenon that initially caused ASHA to be a trifle apprehensive of the sanghas' ability to withstand the fragmentation that was likely to accompany such development.

## Vision, Goals, Strategies and Interventions

In 1983 from its study of the area ASHA identified the following critical problems of the poor in Mylavaram.

- lack of awareness

- low self-confidence

- nil access to existing institutional resources & facilities

- oppression and manipulation by landlords and other powerful sections of local society

- the lack of women's participation in decision-making

In response to this situation and its own philosophy and beliefs ASHA chose to facilitate people of the lower socio-economic strata to come together in sanghas to advance themselves socially and economically through the strength of their own collective reflection and action. ASHA believed that the process by which this would happen should be anchored in the principles of democratic and equal participation, self-reliance and

sustainability. It saw its own role in this process as being one of facilitation in different ways at different stages and clearly of withdrawing itself from the process and physically from the area within a definite timeframe. Another strong belief that has influenced its strategies and programmes is that economic, health and educational development of the target group should accompany the process of institution building. Thus, programmes to improve agricultural production, income generation from farm and non-farm activities, education of children and adults and health have been consistently promoted to buttress economic and social progress. Women have been a particular concern from the start. Strong emphasis has always been given to increasing their equal and self-confident participation in the development process.

## Brief History of ASHA from Inception till 1993

In 1983, two years after ASHA was founded, it became operational in 10 villages towards the northern end of Mylavaram block. A study or Preplanning Phase lasting nine months was funded by the Rural Development Advisory Service (RDAS). R. S. Sharat, his wife, Asha, and a third colleague who is now the Sector Manager, Community Organisation, made-up the team that went around trying to get to know the area, the people, their problems and their needs.

A pilot phase of one year with funding from RDAS and Christian Aid, U.K., followed.

The key components of this programme were:

- non-formal education

- community organisation

- economic activity and skill development

In this phase local animators selected by the community to conduct non-formal education were appointed. They underwent intensive training at ASHA in social analysis and the Paulo Freire approach to learning literacy. Though these animators were later replaced by full time CDPs of ASHA many of them became sangha leaders ensuring that the investment made in their development paid rich dividends.

The first batch of 10 People's Development Sanghas as the sanghas were called in the early days were started in this period. Eight sanghas were formed with men and two with women. Considerable effort into understanding the complex reality of the village and many rounds of discussion preceded the formation of sanghas. Care was taken not to promise development benefits like houses, irrigation wells, etc. The emphasis was on education and consciousness-raising. A concept paper that explored what, why, how and who questions of sangha development was prepared and circulated to staff and animators to enable them to support and facilitate sangha development.

Controversial issues such as caste were not raised in the early stage as the intention was to establish the organisation 'mildly' and to avoid immediate confrontation with the oppressors. Thrift was introduced to foster the cooperative spirit among members. Soon the sanghas began to take cognizance of and act on local problems/issues - repairing a road to the village, resolving a long-standing village feud, approaching the government for homestead land and for providing irrigation facilities to a piece of land that it had given 101 families 25 years ago. Their success bolstered their confidence and increasingly the sanghas became forums for members to ventilate their problems and find solutions. ASHA's small band of dedicated people had succeeded in establishing sanghas as the basic unit of organisation in an area known for heightened political awareness and volatility.

Upto 1984 there had not been much of an economic input into the sanghas but the team observed that their educational and organisation-building efforts were being seriously undermined by the inevitable dependence of sangha members on money lenders and the surrender therein to these local structures of power and exploitation. A phase of resource mobilisation from nationalised banks followed, the purpose of which was to build economic independence and insulate the poor from the evils of money-lending. All decisions relating to who should get loans and for what purpose were taken at sangha meetings and became a highly educating experience wherein a foundation for participative decision-making and responsible self-determination was laid. Sangha members learnt to interface with banks independent of ASHA - a step towards self-reliance. Sanghas were responsible for repayment of the loans to the banks. They introduced a weekly repayment system and recovered 90% of the loans to the surprise of the banks.

About this time ASHA, in response to people's growing expression that raising income was essential to their development and its own belief in the same, started providing sanghas with small funds to be given as crop loans to its members.

## The Structure and Functioning of Community Organisation

### The Sanghas

There were 27 sanghas in the 25 villages covered by ASHA in 1993. The first batch of 10 sanghas was founded in 1984 and the second batch was formed between 1988-89. Initially separate sanghas for men and women were organised, a pattern which was changed in 1988 to only one sangha in which both men and women became members i.e., the male and female heads of a household.

Eligibility to sangha membership has always been strictly defined. Initially only a family with five acres of land or less could become a member. This was later reduced to three acres with the coming of better irrigation and more prosperity. This criterion is closely monitored and members who cross the line are actually removed from time to time. Each sangha maintains a list of members which is revised annually.

Every member pays an annual membership fee to the sangha. Failure to pay this fee before the prescribed period can result in termination. This fee started at Rs.5 and in 1993 was Rs.15.

Elections held once a year gives the sangha its leaders - a President, Vice-President, Secretary, Treasurer, and committee members. In the early years two members other than the office bearers were chosen as members of the managing committee. In 1988 the structure was changed to make the sanghas more participatory and to improve internal communication. This is better understood against the size of the sanghas which ranges from 40-150 with an average of about 100 members. Presently two managing committee members - one male and one female - are chosen for every five households which constitute a "ward" in the structure. These "ward leaders" have the responsibility of informing their ward of meetings, ensuring attendance, collecting membership fees and loans and generally improving communication within the sangha. Similarly the duties of the sangha office bearers have also been codified.

This committee of office bearers and ward leaders meets twice a month - once before and after the general body of the sangha meets which is normally once a month. Attendance at meetings is recorded and monitored. Absence beyond a prescribed limit can result in removal from membership. General body meetings are attended by both men and women. Minutes are recorded by the Secretary a practice that has been adhered to since the start. It is worth mentioning here that many office bearers today were at one time illiterate. They have become literate through the non-formal education programme run by ASHA. We met Gugulothu Ukram a Treasurer of a tribal sangha in Pondugula Thanda, who was once completely illiterate but today keeps the accounts of the sangha,the quantum of whose funds is close to Rs 100,000. The process is also fairly complicated in that he must keep track of income from membership fees, from interest on loans to individual beneficiaries, records of individual loan disbursements and recoveries and sangha expenditure.

In the past, and in some sanghas even till today ASHA's staff maintain or help to maintain records particularly the accounts books. Serious efforts have been initiated to make all sanghas completely self reliant in book keeping. Every sangha has a bank account which is operated by the Treasurer and the Executive Director of ASHA.

Sangha accounts are presented at every general body meeting of the sangha to ensure transparency and accountability. All financial transactions are conducted on the basis of resolutions moved in the sangha meetings.

Sangha accounts are monitored closely by a staff member of ASHA. The Assistant Coordinator/Finance Trainer, whose full time duty it is to go from sangha to sangha checking books of accounts, also acts as a trainer to continuously upgrade the people's capacities to maintain records.

## The Ikya Sangha Samiti

The federation of the 27 sanghas that exist in Mylavaram has its roots in the 'sangha samavesham' (the meeting of the sanghas) that was organised at cluster level in the initial phase and not too successfully. The idea was revived and strengthened in 1987. In July, 1992 the Ikya Sangha Samiti was registered under the Societies Registration Act.

The main purpose of the 'apex' as the Samithi is commonly called is to act as a support structure to the sanghas. Its objects as stated in its constitution are :

1.    to work towards sangha unity

2.    to solve problems within and between sanghas

3.    to supervise and advice sanghas to ensure smooth functioning

4.    to arrange for the audit of sangha funds

5.    to conduct sangha elections

6.    to conduct sports and cultural programmes with sanghas

7.    to liaison and access development schemes and benefits for member sanghas from government and other agencies

The Ikya Samiti would however like to respect the autonomy of sanghas and this makes its role difficult.

All sanghas may become members of the Ikya Samiti on application and payment of a membership fee of Rs.250 per annum. Through this the Ikya Samiti roughly collects Rs.6500 annually. ASHA pays a matching contribution to the Samiti at present. Membership is through the office of the President and Secretary of the sangha, one of whom must be a woman, thereby ensuring 50% representation of women in this body.

The general body of the Ikya Samiti consisting of the sangha Presidents and Secretaries elects the office bearers of the Samiti once in two years - a President, Vice-President, Secretary, Joint Secretary and Treasurer. In addition two committee members are also elected. The roles and responsibilities of this body is defined in the bye-laws of the society.

The general body meets once a month, usually on the second day. At present their meetings are held at ASHA's field office at Kuntamukkala. Meetings normally start at 11 AM and end at about 4 PM. ASHA provides hospitality and pays bus fare to the members who attend. Attendance is usually well above 75%. The community organisation sector staff are present in these meetings in the background and intervene only occasionally.

The managing committee meets twice a month - once on the day of the general body meeting but before it and again on the 15th of each month. Minutes of all meetings are recorded by the Secretary. Unlike the sangha, where the Executive Director of ASHA is a

co-signatory of the bank account, the Samiti's bank account is operated by the President and Treasurer only.

The Ikya Samiti is now capable of liaison with government and other institutions independent of ASHA to harness a wide range of benefits for its members - land, electricity, roads, irrigation facilities, money and so forth - and to resolve problems and conflicts within sanghas. Its leaders are respected for their integrity, capacity and commitment. They volunteer a good deal of their time (unpaid except for travel and food) to visit various offices and to attend sangha meetings. To them it a matter of prestige that comes with social recognition.

A rally organised by the Ikya Samiti in Mylavaram on the occasion of International Literacy Day and another in protest against liquor have added to its stature. At the invitation of the district collector, the Samiti sent 10 volunteers to the Krishna Pushkaram last year.

The role of the Ikya Samiti is still evolving and its future responsibilities and roles are as yet not fully clear. A paid Secretary may be desirable for the Ikya Samiti to assist it in its tasks. An issue that stalks its future is its financial sustainability. Member contributions are inadequate to meet its expenses. An idea that is yet to be fully developed is that of each sangha contributing a fixed percent of the interest it earns per annum on the various credit funds it operates to the Samiti.

## The Place of Women in the Sangha

One of ASHA's most outstanding achievements is the place women have in the people's organisations. Today, women are in the sanghas and in the Ikya Samiti not only in equal numbers but cheek to jowl as it were with men at the leadership level as well.

Women have always been in the sanghas - first in the 'all women's' sanghas and later through a policy imperative equality in numbers was consolidated with either the President or Secretary of a sangha and the Ikya Samiti having to compulsorily be a woman. For every male managing committee member of the sangha there is a female managing committee member. Not many organisations have achieved this level of equal representation.

The general experience in organisational work has been that while women are often in the forefront of the organisation in the early stages, they get left behind in the process of formalisation and institutionalisation of the organisation, a development that has been avoided in ASHA's case through deliberate policy intervention.

Besides the general body meetings of the sangha in which both male and female members participate, women meet separately as members of thrift groups. Since both the husband and wife must attend sangha meetings and since meetings are usually held at night, some sanghas hold separate meetings for men and women to overcome this problem.

Thrift was initiated as a mechanism to strengthen the women and for nucleating activities particularly relevant to them. It has found encouraging acceptance. 25 villages now have thrift groups with a total membership of 794 and cumulative savings of Rs.2,38,345 ( as on Oct.1993). Some of the thrift groups are starting small income generation activities that are not only expected to improve their incomes but are likely to improve their confidence and ability to deal with the market.

# GRAM

Those who knew Gram Abhuyudhaya Mandali (GRAM) in 1980 as an organisation of three persons trying to work with rickshaw pullers in five villages around Dharmaram in Nizambad district of Andhra Pradesh with Rs.5000 in the kitty would not recognise it today.

GRAM currently works in about 260 villages spread across 9 mandals in Nizamabad and Adilabad districts, Close to 300 paid staff and ten times that number of village-level volunteers and an annual budget outlay of over Rs 10 million makes GRAM a formidable organisation by any measurement. The most pertinent measuring tool germane to this study is the number and strength of people's organisations that have taken life in the region thanks to GRAM's relentless efforts over the last 13 years. Three apex organisations the Dalit Jyothi, the Dalit Seva Sangam and the Dalit Velugu in Nizamabad, Muddanuru and Mudhol taluks respectively representing dalits (the most oppressed people in any community by GRAM's definition) and with a combined membership of over 15,000, have emerged as formidable forces that local administrators and politicians are compelled to respect.

In the early years, GRAM delivered services in agriculture and education. Gradually and consciously it has changed from merely delivering development services into an organisation with a mission to build people's organisations. In GRAM's theory of develop-ment, numbers matter as is evidenced by the situation on the ground today. And so do women.

GRAM began to work with women in 1986. From the wealth of experience it has accumulated since then GRAM has come to believe that the development process is balanced and complete only if women are empowered to participate in it. In keeping with this belief, much of GRAM's efforts today are directed at women. In recognition of women's status as dalits in the truest sense of the word and their tremendous energy and dynamism,GRAM in collaboration with the Dalit Jyothi, (a federation of 30 male and 27 female sanghas in Nizamabad district) introduced in February 1993 an alternative banking system for women called 'Inti Deepam' meaning "light of the household". This institution presently functions in 4 mandals of Nizamabad - Dichpalli, Muddanuru, Jakranpálli and

Nizamabad. In the future it aims at networking 92 women's sanghas consisting of 3,000 members in Nizamabad district alone, not counting the women's sanghas existing in Adilabad district. The scheme started with an initial credit fund of about Rs.7,35,000 from registration fees, the cumulative savings of the first year and a contribution from GRAM to ensure a credit base of Rs.245 per woman. While savings and credit will be the main plank of the Inti Deepam, it is envisaged that it will grow into an institution to promote women's total development.

GRAM's founder N. Samson, who came from the Andhra region to organise rickshaw pullers in Dharmaram, continues to be at the centre of the NGO's affairs as its chief functionary and chief visionary. In his words, as both benefactor and beneficiary he has taken root in the area and has made Dharmaram his home.

This is also where GRAM has its modest office. The real hub of the organisation however seems to be at Suddapalli, forty kilometres away, where GRAM has a large farm, training centre and the office of its oldest project covering Nizamabad Mandal.

GRAM runs the Dharmaram and Muddanuru projects in Nizamabad district besides the Raipur-Kandli and the Vittoli projects in Mudhol taluk of Adilabad district. With the exception of the Vittoli project which is funded by ACTIONAID, all the other projects are funded by NOVIB, the Netherlands Organisation for Development Co-operation. The focus of this study is the Vittoli project which is funded by ACTIONAID. It is pertinent to note that GRAM applies a fairly uniform development approach and strategy in all of its projects.

## THE GRAM-ACTIONAID Partnership in Vittoli

The GRAM - ACTIONAID partnership commenced in 1986 in Nizamabad and in the area of education. Shortly thereafter, due to a fundamental change of policy within ACTIONAID a completely new set of villages in Mudhol taluk in neighbouring Adilabad district were identified for starting a new project which was not only to be funded exclusively by ACTIONAID but would also be influenced by its policies.

The Vittoli project in Mudhol taluk became operational in 1987. In 1993 this project covered 20 villages in Mudhol mandal and 10 villages in Loheswar mandal. The project area is approximately 15 kms by 25 kms. The closest village is 2 kms and the farthest village is 15 kms away from the project office.

The project shares an office at Mudhol with another GRAM project known as the Raipur - Kandli project. The latter works in all the villages of Mudhol taluk that are not covered by the Vittoli project thereby consolidating the area spread and numerical strength that is of strategic importance to GRAM.

# The Project Background

Before this report moves on it would be interesting to examine briefly the historicity of the region for a fuller understanding of the environment in which the project operates.

Andhra Pradesh is composed of three distinct geo-political regions - coastal Andhra or the Circars, Rayalseema and Telengana. The first two regions were a part of the Madras Presidency until October 1953 when they were detached and joined to form a separate state of Andhra Pradesh. Telengana, formerly a part of the erstwhile State of Hyderabad, was added in November 1956.

The State of Hyderabad was an autocracy like most native states in India. Little attention was paid to people's welfare. Education in Urdu was compulsory. The condition of agricultural tenants was particularly deplorable. They were submitted to serfdom and slavery by the big landlords. Even elementary civil rights did not exist. The people of Telengana suffered from the double disadvantage of British domination and oppressive rule of the Nizam, who being of Persian origin had no sympathy for his Hindu subjects. Natural disasters such as prolonged famine added to people's sufferings.

Then came the Communist parties and revolutionary violence in the late 40s and early 50s. The region due to its deeply feudal culture and character and long-standing domination by the Andhras, has been a stronghold of radical leftist organisations since early independence. The Naxalities are literally in occupation of the region and are a daily plague to the administration.

Mudhol Taluk is almost entirely rural. Mudhol, the taluk headquarters and Bainsa are the only urban settlements. Nizamabad and Nirmal, the nearest towns are 60 kilometres away. The Maharashtra border is closer than Hyderabad the state capital which is two hundred kilometres away. Like most border regions, the ways of life, language, dress, other customs, etc. are mixed. Poorly developed roads speak of state neglect, a feature common to border areas.

The climate is dry. Summer temperatures are as high as 45-46 degrees celsius. Agriculture is the economic mainstay of the region. As part of the Deccan Plateau, it is a traditional cotton growing area. Oilseeds, particularly sunflower, have become increasingly popular. Improvements in dryland farming techniques and seed varieties have enhanced land productivity considerably.

Large farmers with a holding size of 10 acres of wetland or 20 acres of dryland own 74% of the available land. They constitute 16% of the households. Eight percent of households belong to the medium category. Small farmers with holdings less than 2.5 acres in case of wetland or 5 acres if they own dryland, constitute 56% of the population. Landless labour constitute 20% of the households (GRAM, Annual Report 1989-90).

The area is predominantly Hindu and has no history of conversion to other religions. The Kapu caste own most of the best land. They also control the local self-government institutions such as the mandals and the zilla parishad.

Untouchability and the manifestations of the feudal system though long dismantled continue to haunt the people and their behaviour. Money lending and the evils that go with it characterise what GRAM describes as the dependency culture of the region.

The women are poorly off. The practice of child marriage was widely prevalent in the past; it still lingers on in some pockets. Most women from the poorer class start beedi-making when they are still children and as a result never attend school. Beedi making also affects their health adversely. Female literacy is 2.1% . The men are not much better off at 15 %. Despite the many odds that confront poor women here, GRAM says "they are truly managers who run the household organisation in the face of scarcity and non-cooperation from their families and yet are not rewarded for their struggles or management skills."

## The Target Group

It is estimated that there are a total of 4474 households or families in the 30 villages that form the operational area of the Vittoli Project of which 77% or 3457 households would fall within the target group. GRAM defines its target as families whose total income is less than Rs. 1080 per capita per annum and/or who own less than five acres of dryland or two and a half acres of wetland.

As of September 1993 the coverage of the target group under sangha membership was as follows:

| Caste | Total Target Families | Target Group Families covered | Membership Male | Female | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Scheduled Castes | 1069 | 756 | 491 | 502 | 993 |
| Scheduled Tribes | 472 | 262 | 206 | 168 | 374 |
| Backward Castes and Others | 1916 | 937 | 742 | 339 | 1081 |
| TOTAL | 3457 | 1955 | 1439 | 1009 | 2448 |

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## Aims and Objectives

GRAM seeks to educate, organise and empower socially, culturally and economically oppressed sections of people including women in rural areas to effectively participate in their own development and to influence policy processes through their collective strength. The inclusion of environmental concerns is integral to the development process in GRAM's perspective.

## The Strategy

Institution building is at the core of GRAM's development strategy; the sanghas at village level, one for men and another for women constitute the basic unit of the people's organisation with the federation of the sanghas at the mandal and taluk levels.

The process as perceived by GRAM follows three developmental stages - formation, formalisation and consolidation. In the formative stage, the target group is expected to coalesce around common social, cultural and economic issues in the sangha. The stage of formalisation is the stage at which processes and structures of the institution at the different levels which have hitherto been informal arrangements are formalised. In the final stage, this coalition is excepted to consolidate and sharpen the reflection and action around social, cultural and economic issues sharpen.

Other development interventions are also undertaken and are meant to improve the economic, health and educational well-being of the members of the sanghas on the one hand and to strengthen the process of institutional development on the other.

## A Short History of the Vittoli Project

Two distinct periods are discernible in the history of the Vittoli project. The first covers the period from project inception in 1986 to 1988 and is best described by GRAM as the "socio-economic" phase which was oriented towards loosely-knit beneficiary groups at village level that gradually converged into sanghas.

The second phase takes off in 1989 with a transition at the conceptual level from a socio-economic to a "socio-cultural orientation". This phase also included concerted efforts to organise women of the target population into separate women sanghas. Both male and female sanghas are currently in the stage of consolidation.

### The Socio-Economic Phase (1986-88)

GRAM's entry into Mudhol was not easy. The people here suspected it among other things of being an extremist organisation. A breach in a local tank in village Abdullapur gave GRAM an opportunity to improve its standing with the people. It catalysed community action to repair the tank in the course of which it gained local acceptance. GRAM capitalised on the foothold it had gained in the area by introducing an agricultural

development programme consisting of farm extension and inputs. In retrospect, a natural and deleterious outcome of such an intervention was an influx of those who owned land and who were hence 'better off' into GRAM's clientele. To counter this trend GRAM introduced the grain bank concept under which eligibility for crop credit was tied to membership in the grain bank scheme. As a result, many of the better off farmers dropped out of the sanghas.

It is pertinent to note that GRAM's development approach was initially biased towards agriculture and education. It viewed its clientele as beneficiaries of these programmes. The concept of organisation building was not in existence at that time. In the absence of this clarity, GRAM's development interventions of the time were in the nature of delivering services. The sangha concept emerged gradually. GRAM soon realised that while people were happy to receive its development largesse they were not making any contribution to their own development, as a consequence of which, they were becoming completely dependent on GRAM.

### The Socio-Cultural Phase (1989-1994)

The build up of critical reflection in GRAM resulted in a major paradigm shift. In 1989 the socio-cultural concept of sangha organisation emerged in opposition to the earlier phase of socio-economic organisation which was seen to create dependency and to impede the people from moving towards self-reliance and empowerment. In effect, this meant that GRAM tried to increase the people's participation and contribution to their own development and to reduce particularly its financial inputs to the sanghas.

This conceptual shift also implied a change from the programme orientation of the project to a process orientation. Another shift that occurred was the increasing recognition of the Government as the legitimate agency of development and of people's rights to their share of the development cake.

To accomplish the re-orientation, intensive training of sangha members and leaders was undertaken, savings to increase the people's equity in the sanghas was more vigorously pursued and GRAM did its best to increase people's involvement and control over sangha processes. Elections to establish sangha leadership more firmly were held. Sanghas rules and regulation were formulated more precisely. An adhoc apex body was formed. Sangha executives were involved in drawing up the project's economic programmes for 1990-91. A production fund and a separate consumption credit fund were established in each sangha.

The Sangha Crop Credit Fund (production fund) was created through the contribution from GRAM of Rs.800 per male member and Rs.500 per female member. This fund is used to extend short term crop loans to members and is managed by the sanghas. By late 1993, 1495 male and 1021 female sangha members had been assisted from this fund through their respective sanghas.

The Consumption Credit Fund, as the name implies meets consumption credit needs of the members and for a short period. It was formed from individual member savings and a matching grant from GRAM.Every sangha has also been provided with an Emergency Credit Fund, to meet emergency expenses related to health. No interest is charged on any of the loans. Books of accounts are maintained in every sangha but almost all sanghas depend on GRAM's staff to write their books.

GRAM also intervenes in health and education. These interventions however are not confined to the sangha members alone, as is the case of its economic and agricultural inputs. Activities in health and education are also not under the control and management of the sanghas as is the case with its economic inputs.

The Education Programme consisted of adult education in the past(now closed down), and includes pre-school, supplementary, non-formal and, more recently, reading centres. The programme is seen to have contributed to an increase of about 10% and 7% respectively in male and female literacy.

## The Structure and Functioning of Community Organisation in Vittoli

GRAM has promoted a three-tier structure of community organisation beginning at the village level with separate sanghas for men and women, which interact at the mandal level and federate at the taluk level.

The sanghas at the village level came into existence first. The process of networking gained monumentum about two years after the first batch of 23 sanghas had been established.In 1990 an *ad hoc* apex body of both male and female sanghas was formed. In 1991, the apex body was formally incorporated as a society called the Dalit Velugu. Given growing numbers a process of decentralisation began in 1993 with Dalit Velugu meetings being held at the mandal level.

### The Sanghas

As of September 1993 there were 30 male sanghas in the project with a total membership of 1439 members of which 697 belonged to scheduled castes and scheduled tribes and 742 belonged to other castes. All sanghas follow more or less the same norms which have been developed together with GRAM. Every member pays an annual membership fee to the sangha that varies from Rs. 5 to Rs. 20. Each sangha elects a sangha committee once a year that consists of a President, Vice President , the Secretary , the Treasurer and one or more advisors depending on the size of the sangha and an apex body member. The committee like the sangha normally meets once a month, before the sangha meeting. Every sangha has a bank account operated by the President, Treasurer and concerned cluster organiser from GRAM.

The various credit funds that GRAM has helped each sangha to establish appear to be the centre of sangha life. Of these the the Crop Credit Fund is the most important.

The repayment of sangha loans is on the decline particularly in the male sanghas. In 1992-93 only 44% of the sanghas (of women and men) were able to repay about 75% of the loan. In another 40% of the sanghas, for this crop year, there was no repayment . It was interesting to note that in some cases, there was wilful default. (Mid Term Project Review Report, Sept 1993). This trend is seen to be affecting the strength of the sanghas. Defaulters do not attend sangha meetings for fear of being chastised for non-repayment. It is likely that the attitude of not repaying loans will spread among the members thereby eroding the existing financial base of the sanghas and the sustainability of the organisation itself.

## Women Sanghas

The first nine women's sanghas were formed in 1989. In 1993 there were 30 women's sanghas in the Vittoli project. For strategic reasons GRAM first organised common sanghas in a village for a short period of about six months to give itself a foothold in the community before if began organising separate sanghas for women. Initially even better off women became members of the women's sanghas probably in anticipation of substantial financial benefit as had been the case in the male sanghas that had been formed in the early period. Most of such women left when they found that the rules had changed. Today women from the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes constitute the majority of the membership in the women's sanghas.By and large, members of the male and female sanghas in a village are not related.

The pivotal point of the women's sanghas is savings and credit. Initially, savings was in the form of grain and later in cash. The savings and credit activity has been far more successful in the women's sanghas than in the male sanghas. Other than this, the women's sanghas have followed the same pattern as the male sanghas. Not much emphasis seems to be given to what may be considered women's issues as points of discussion and action and this may be due to a lack of understanding on how to address women's empowerment. Efforts to employ women to work in the project and to train both male and female organisers in supporting women's development have yet to yield results.

A prominent feminist trainer in the state was engaged to train the staff on gender issues. The women staff who were interviewed including the Women's Coordinator in the Mobile Project Support Team expressed their disappointment with this training in that it did not enable them to address programmatic issues of women's empowerment in the specific context in which they worked.

GRAM as an organisation particularly at the highest level of the leadership strongly believes in gender equality and women's empowerment. It strives to operationalise this

belief both within its own organisation and among the people it works with. The women staff in GRAM meet once a month to discuss and address women's issues, as a result of which the organisation has changed some of its policies in favour of women. Close to half of GRAM's full-time staff are women, though very few women hold jobs at the top leadership level of the organisation. The self confidence of the women this study encountered in the Vittoli project was indeed impressive.

## The Mandal Committee

There are four such mandal committees in Mudhol taluk. Each sangha is represented by one member in the mandal committee. A mandal on an average has 30 villages and 60 sanghas, i.e., 30 male and 30 female sanghas. The mandal committee of about 60 members meets once a month independent of GRAM. This committee attends to problems that cannot be solved at sangha level such as recovery of bad loans, village disputes and accessing of government assistance.

## The Dalit Velugu

This federation of all the male and female sanghas in Mudhol taluk, about 225 in total, is intended to act mainly as a pressure group on local government institutions to ensure that members of the sanghas receive their legitimate share of development benefits.

The apex committee currently consists of 5 representatives from each of the 4 mandals making a total of 20 members. These members elect the office bearers of the Dalit Velugu once a year. Every year 15 members of the apex committee exit to permit 15 new members to come on to the committee; 5 members continue for a second year to ensure continuity within the committee.

The apex committee meets on the 25th of each month for a day at the project office. For a short while, the Dalit Velugu had rented an office at Bainsa which turned out to be unaffordable. GRAM pays the salary of an office assistant to assist the Dalit Velugu to keep its records, etc. The Dalit Velugu has its own bank account.

The composition of the apex committee in late 1993 was as follows :

|  | Female | Male | Total |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Scheduled Castes | 2 | 5 | 7 |
| Scheduled Tribes | 2 | 4 | 6 |
| Backward Castes | 2 | 4 | 6 |
| Other Castes | - | 1 | 1 |
| Total | 6 | 14 | 20 |

The Dalit Velugu receives Rs. 101 from each sangha as initial membership fee. Thereafter, each sangha member pays the Dalit Velugu an annual membership fee of Rs. 5 through the sangha. These fees are the main source of income at present. Expenses are mostly in the nature of travel expenses paid to committee members.

The Dalit Velugu introduced a unique exercise called 'Prajja Sadhasu' meaning 'People's Forum' in the taluk, which has now been co-opted by political parties.

The Prajja Sadhasu was introduced to provide the people with a forum at which they could interact with government officials and elected representatives to air their grievances and expectations, negotiate solutions to problems, be informed of government schemes and benefits and generally to bridge the gap which was known to exist between the weaker sections, the bureaucracy and politicians. It has proved to be very successful and has not only helped reduce the initial hostility of the local bureaucracy and politicians to the Dalit Velugu, but in time has also brought it tremendous local recognition and respect. Office bearers of the Dalit Velugu are now invited to participate in various official meetings at the mandal and the taluk level as a result of which 137 sangha members from three sanghas had received government assistance to the tune of Rs. 13,95,000 as of September 1993.

The Dalit Velugu seems to have gained a place for itself in the local power equation. Individual office bearers may have acquired political ambitions in the process, a fact which was strongly denied by Gangaram, the President of the Dalit Velugu who said that they did not have the money to back such ambitions.

The apex also assists in solving intractable sangha-level problems which cannot be solved at the mandal level.

In 1992, the Dalit Velugu and its member sanghas organised an anti-arrack rally in Mudhol that brought it further prominence. This rally was part of growing public awareness across the whole of Andhra Pradesh on the arrack issue. The Dalit Velugu is a member of a state-wide association of agricultural labourers that has been instrumental in introducing an Employment Guarantee Scheme in six districts of Andhra Pradesh.

Though GRAM does not have an exit strategy as such, the members of the apex are confident of being able to sustain and run the organisation on their own should the occasion arise.

# CHAPTER IV

## UNDERSTANDING COMMUNITY ORGANISATION

Determining the framework for an analysis of the foregoing case studies was challenging. The core element had evidently to be an examination of the concept of community organisation in the particularities of each case, using one or more perspectives as the standard or *a priori* ideal definition and model. This task was not made easy by the fact that community organisation has acquired a variety of perspectives and definitions since its origin in the early part of this century.

Broadly, three sets of perspectives seem to continue to be used today. The first relates to using beneficiary organisation as an instrument of project effectiveness and sustainability. The second is largely concerned with the alleviation of poverty and is essentially reformistic in nature. The third perspective seeks radical change in the structures and systems that breed inequality and poverty.

These definitions clearly need to be reviewed in the light of changing societal systems and conditions such as the collapse of socialist regimes and Marxism as a popular theory of social transformation, increasing globalisation of markets and economies, and the virtual domination of capitalism as the sole economic system the world over.

Choosing a perspective upon which to focus examination posed a methodological dilemma. The third or transformative perspective was a natural choice. Given, however, the fact that the nature of most NGO intervention today is reformistic - hopefully as a stage on the way to a more just society - it did not seem the right choice.

What seems sorely missing in India today is a native, cogent and comprehensive theory of social change to guide social action, which takes into account current social, economic, cultural and political realities. The existence of such a theory would have enabled a better analysis of existing community organisation praxis.

In the absence of such a theory, the analysis of the cases under study is limited to an empirical examination of the different attempts to promote community organisation in terms of certain key elements and dimensions; factors related to clients and their environment which are seen to influence community organisation; and, finally, some significant learnings that may be derived from the experiences under study.

# 1. Factors Influencing the Process of Community Organisation

## a) The Client Group

People from the same socio-economic strata have much in common, are likely to be more supportive of each other and are, therefore, more likely to coalesce as a group of equals with a common purpose and future than disparate members of the community.

Homogeneity of the client group is best exemplified in ASHA where, both by definition and continuous application of the membership criteria, the homogeneity of sangha member-ship has been scrupulously maintained - a factor that evidently contributes to the strength of sangha organisation in Mylavaram.

GRAM, on the other hand, is a good example of how heterogeneity of membership in the economic plane can debilitate organisational cohesiveness. One of the reasons advanced to explain the poor health of male sanghas in GRAM is the inclusion of 'better-offs' in the membership, who wield considerable influence and have been resisting efforts to improve sangha functioning.

Though the tribals in Gudalur belong to five different tribes, their common tribal identity has undoubtedly enabled ACCORD to successfully build the AMS. What was not really probed in the course of this study, was the difference, if any, in the levels of participation, control and impact of organising among the five tribes.

A 'readiness or resistance to change' is another factor operative at the community level that can inhibit or facilitate the process of organising. The target group in ASHA though poor, were exposed to the prosperity and progress of Krishna district. Further, they were not psychologically impaired by an unfavourable historicity as could be ascribed to the poor in Mudhol taluk. The readiness to change prevailing among ASHA's clientele is sure to have given them a head start in the process of organising.

In ACCORD's case, the progressiveness of the Moolakurumba tribals is likely to have enabled them to perceive the advantages of organising sooner than the other tribals - a factor that is likely to have influenced the other tribals to embrace change more readily. Tribal communal traditions and ethos are also likely to have facilitated the organising process.

The 'culture of silence and dependence' that is historically characteristic of the poor in Telengana has posed GRAM with a greater challenge than ASHA in organising the client group.

## b) The Socio-economic and Political Environment

The physical environment in Mylavaram - flat terrain, good road communication, proximity to a prosperous urban centre (Vijayawada), and the availability of water - is the best of the

three cases, and has been the most enabling of community organisation. Mudhol is dry and prone to drought. Summer temperatures can be very high. The roads are largely dirt roads and do not connect all areas. It is far away from important centres of trade and commerce. The physical environment in Mudhol, while not as enabling as in Mylavaram, is not as inhibitive as in Gudalur. Gudalur has the most inhospitable terrain and weather, added to which is the poor state of the roads. The physical environment is certainly not enabling and may even be considered a major deterrent to the organising process.

The social, economic and political conditions are the most favourable in ASHA and the least favourable in GRAM. Mylavaram is a part of a region of Andhra Pradesh that is most advanced on all these counts. The level of political consciousness and participation is much higher here than in Mudhol. This is likely to have influenced ASHA's political shyness, a stance that has enabled it to stay out of controversy and to concentrate on building the community organisation on a strong economic base. The social outlook on women is also far more positive in Mylavaram than in Mudhol.

Mudhol is a part of the Telengana region which has a long history of feudalism, violent politics, state neglect and underdevelopment. The outlook on women is still highly conservative. The prevailing socio-economic backwardness and political stalemate of the area are inherently inhibitive of organising, and have called for greater effort and ingenuity from GRAM. Breaking traditional client-patron relationships of obligation and dependence have not been easy. The social position of women demanded separate sanghas for women. The disturbed nature of the political process is likely to have influenced GRAM's leaning towards mass organisation as the most effective means by which the poor would be politically heard.

ACCORD, has supported the tribals in resisting local exploitation involving land in particular, and in systematically campaigning for re-distribution of land in their favour. It has managed to pursue these strategies which are inherently confrontational on the basis of the strength and unity of the tribal organisation and with the support of the press, bureaucracy and some enlightened politicians.

The thriving plantation economy in Gudalur may be considered a positive stimulant to organisation among the tribals here. The visible success of the non-tribals in planting crops such as tea, pepper and ginger has acted as an eye-opener to the tribals and has stirred them on to organising. The economic environment has opportunities to offer, subject to the tribal ability to grasp these opportunities.

ASHA and GRAM have confined their roles largely to building credit self-sufficiency of their clients in the first instance, and then towards leveraging government development assistance. Their roles vis-a-vis the sanghas have not been such as to invite the hostility of entrenched social, economic and political interests. In ACCORD, on the other hand, the issue of exploitation has been confronted directly through an activist approach.

## 2. Dimensions of Community Organisation

The particularities of each case are examined in terms of the key elements of community organisation.

### a) Objectives

All three organisations seek to improve the social, cultural, educational and economic conditions of their clientele. While ASHA and ACCORD had from the start clearly perceived that organisation of the client community was essential to ensure their self-reliant development, GRAM began with a service delivery approach. Experience induced it to adopt a more progressive approach.

All three organisations seek to change the socio-economic status of their clients by enabling their participation in the development process so as to wrest a better deal for themselves. ACCORD and GRAM also expect their clients to influence existing development paradigms and the process itself, through their collective strength and bargaining power. Mass organisation - a concept which is broader and more political than community organisation - is a part of GRAM's current perspective.

ACCORD includes culture as another area of client development, and stresses the strengthening of tribal identity as an important aim.

### b) Strategies

Local organisation

The strategies used by all three projects are similar in some respects. A core strategy common to all three has been that of building a local organisation of the client groups to attain development goals and to ensure the sustainability of the development process. Each organisation has, however, gone about this somewhat differently.

ASHA and ACCORD took a whole year to understand the people and their issues before launching into organisation *per se*. ASHA's entry point was through community education and awakening by establishing non-formal adult learning centres in every operational village.

ACCORD used the method of social analysis with groups of young tribals to understand the tribal situation, to raise their awareness of problems affecting tribal society and to introduce the concept of collective strength through organisation for protecting and advancing tribal interests.

Thereafter, ASHA and ACCORD went about helping their clientele (clearly defined on the basis of income level and land-holding in the case of ASHA, and tribal identity in ACCORD) to coalesce into groups called sanghas at the village level.

Unlike ASHA and ACCORD which, from the beginning, adopted a clear rationale and direction, and have intrinsically stayed within the initial frameworks they chose, GRAM's approach and strategies have a somewhat chequered history. The project began with a beneficiary and service approach. Two to three years later, it adopted a more progressive approach in keeping with which it tried to undo what it perceived as 'damage done' by reducing financial inputs into the sanghas and trying to increase member contributions so as to reduce dependence on GRAM. As part of the same mode of thinking, its belief in numerical strength emerged. The apex organisation, its growth and development, consumed GRAM's attention at the cost of the sanghas, which were still in the process of internalising the new ideological stance of GRAM.

## Economic Self-help

All three projects have invested large funds to develop credit self-sufficiency at the sangha level, to boost income and prevent indebtedness. Concomitantly, clients have been assisted in developing rules and regulations regarding these funds and in building the capacities to manage them, and keep records and accounts. These twin strategies of creating credit funds and of developing the requisite capacities to manage them independently have succeeded, but in varying degrees.

Though ASHA strongly believed in developing the economic base of the client group, it deliberately refrained from infusing funds from outside into the sanghas in the early stage of their development, as it did not wish to develop a 'provider image'. It concentrated on building the social foundation of the sanghas using the self-help concept. Later, it chose to facilitate access to institutional (bank) credit for a period of time. It was only after good borrower behaviour was established that it began to infuse its own funds into the sanghas to create various credit funds which were to be self-managed. ASHA has consciously taught its client community at various stages to be responsible for its own development.

All three organisations have attempted to introduce savings and thrift as a sangha activity in one form or the other. In general, only the women are engaged in this activity.

## Other Sectoral Interventions

The other strategy common to all three projects is provision of services in agriculture, health and education to improve agricultural production, and the educational and health status of clients. It seems to have been intended that the health and educational interventions at least would be taken over by the community organisation after a while. In both ASHA and GRAM, educational programmes have had a positive impact and are valued by the people. The Ikya Samiti intends to continue to run some part of the programme after ASHA withdraws. Intervention in education began late in ACCORD's case and it is too early to assess its impact. The health intervention has had an insignificant impact in Mudhol and Mylavaram, while it is highly valued in Gudalur. This could be due to the

importance that health is given in ACCORD and the professional manner in which the programme is run there. The health programme in ASHA and GRAM appear to be organised as a separate activity over which the community organisation asserts little ownership; whereas in Gudalur, the health programme appears to be closely entwined with the tribal organisation.

## Leveraging Government Assistance

A strategy that all three projects use relates to the leveraging of governmental assistance. Initially the projects established contacts with various agencies and departments of the government and were largely instrumental in sourcing funds. Gradually, this function has been taken over by the apex bodies that have emerged as part of the local organisations. All three projects have consistently projected the apex bodies as the authority to liaise with local government departments.

## Identity and Activism

ACCORD, alone, attempted to mix what it calls 'activism' with development. Unlike ASHA, which maintained a low profile and kept away from addressing controversial local issues in order to protect the fledgling community organisation, ACCORD emboldened the tribals to protest all forms of local exploitation, particularly that related to land which was acute and rampant. In the second year of its entry into Gudalur, it promoted a campaign on land alienation throughout the taluk which became the rallying point for the tribals in Gudalur, and out of which grew the AMS tribal federation. Alongside struggling over land, ACCORD introduced the somewhat revolutionary idea that tribals could grow tea like other small and big planters in the Nilgiris. This idea took root and has improved the economic status of the tribals, as well as their self-image.

A strategy underlying all others that ACCORD adopted from the start has been that of reviving tribal culture and tradition so as to re-build tribal identity and self-respect, necessary if tribals are to participate in mainstream society. Out of this strategy, grew one of setting up tribal institutions, owned and managed by tribals. All these strategies have paid rich dividends. Tribal identity has been formed. Strong emotional bonds and solidarity have been created, which sets the community organisation in Gudalur apart from the others.

## Advocacy

A strategy which differentiates ACCORD from ASHA and GRAM is the persistent use of advocacy as a means of bringing about changes in policy and programme implementation affecting tribal life. Tribals have been encouraged and trained to use the press, build relationships with the bureaucracy and enlightened politicians and be a part of larger tribal networks — all in order to advance their cause.

## Women

Both ASHA and GRAM, unlike ACCORD, have well established perspectives and strategies concerning women. ASHA began with a few separate sanghas for women. A short while later, in consultation with the client community, it decided to promote sanghas in which both male and female heads of households would be equal members. In pursuance of its policy on equal participation, it developed structures and systems wherein women are equally represented, both in the numerical sense and at the leadership level. Currently, ASHA is pursuing a strategy to establish a separate and supplementary income and savings base for women.

GRAM began by promoting mixed sanghas of men and women for a while to gain community acceptance. Soon thereafter, it launched separate sanghas for women. GRAM has recently established an institution for women called 'Inti Deepam' which though presently focused on savings and credit will eventually incorporate a more holistic agenda.

ACCORD does not have a deliberate policy to ensure a place for women in the organisation as a result of which women have been largely left out of the organisation.

## Landless

While the landless are found in the membership of all three local organisations strategies to address their particular needs are not as focused as other strategies. Since the last two years particularly, ASHA has applied itself to improving the skills and occupational needs of this group. ACCORD encourages landless tribals to encroach upon and occupy government land which traditionally have been under their use. The landless in GRAM have benefited less than the landed membership for want of a clear strategy to address their special needs.

## Political Involvement

All three organisations have stayed away from the mainstream political process. ASHA most of all. None of the organisations have used the capture of electoral positions as a means of advancing the power of their clients. If some members of the organisation occupy positions of political leadership, it is not through a deliberate strategy of the local organisation but through individual effort. The numerical strength of the Dalit Velugu does vest it with latent political power. Similarly, the organisation of tribals anywhere instills a certain wariness in governmental and political circles.

## Planned Withdrawal

Both ASHA and ACCORD believe in the notion of exit or withdrawal. They have instituted, or are in the process of instituting, definite measures to facilitate their withdrawal from the development process they have initiated in Mylavaram and Gudalur, respectively. These measures take into account the sustainability of the local organisations. GRAM, however,

does not associate its withdrawal from the area with the autonomy and self-management of the local organisation. It sees itself as an institution which need not necessarily wither away but must rather assume new and diversified roles to further enhance local development. For example, it seeks to establish certain local enterprises that would add value to existing resources and increase the employment potential of the area.

## c) Structure and Functioning of Community Organisation

### Membership

In all three cases community organisation began at the village level. Sections of the village community, distinguished by the extent of their annual income and ownership of land in the case of ASHA and GRAM and tribal identity in the case of ACCORD, were enabled to coalesce as a group with a common purpose and identity. In Mylavaram those who are seen to have crossed the criteria of membership are actually removed from the membership from time to time to ensure continuing homogeneity.In all three cases, clients have been chosen on the basis of their socio-economic and/or cultural vulnerability and homogeneity. ACCORD particularly has used the principle of common identity to forge tribal unity. GRAM seems to have tried to use the same principle in building a dalit identity as is evidenced in the naming of the apex organisation but does not appear to have really advanced this as a core organising principle as ACCORD has done in the case of tribals.

GRAM has opted to organise men and women in separate sanghas at the village level to ensure that women's needs are met ; ASHA's client community has chosen to include both male and female heads of household as 'equal' members of a sangha. In ACCORD the sanghas are predominantly male forums, although a few women's sanghas exist. This is because ACCORD held the belief for a time that tribal society is equal and as such women did not require to be organised separately.

### Size

The size of a sangha varies in all three cases. ASHA advises the people to start a new sangha where the size of a sangha exceeds 100-odd members. Contrary to common belief that smaller groups(15-25) hold together more effectively, sangha size does not appear to have been a major consideration in any of the cases in building the local organisation.

### Sangha Identity

Sanghas in Mylavaram and Mudhol have each given themselves names. Similarly, the AMS has used a flag, a sangam dhoti, etc. to strengthen identity and a feeling of belonging to the organisation.

## Meetings

All the sanghas normally meet once a month. Meetings were held more frequently in the early years and were usually attended by the concerned field staff of the project. These days most sanghas meet on their own. Meetings serve the purpose of building group solidarity and of deciding and acting collectively on matters of on-going buisness. The sanghas in Mylavaram and Mudhol by and large meet in their respective village community centres that have been constructed by their sponsor NGOs whereas ACCORD has not constructed such buildings for the tribals. The presence or absence of a sangha building in itself does not appear to infuence its functioning in any significant manner though it does add to people's confidence in the community concept.

Decisions are taken in a fairly participatory manner at sangha meetings. A culture of silence appears more in evidence in Mudhol and Gudalur than in Mylavaram. In Mylavaram the sangha committee meets before a sangha meeting to review action on decisions taken and to prepare for the sangha meeting itself. This gives the process a certain seriousness and throughness that is characteristic of the organisation in Mylavaram.

## Attendance

Attendance at sangha meetings continues to be above 75% in Mylavaram. Absence beyond the prescribed limit can result in removal from the membership. Sanghas in Mylavaram also follow a set procedure in conducting meetings. In general, the sanghas in Mudhol and Gudalur do not appear to be as procedurally conscious as the sanghas in ASHA which does seem to affect their functioning. Weak procedure in Gudalur, however, is countervailed by other factors such as resistence to exploitation.

## Issues

The issues discussed in all three cases weave around credit, development schemes, services of the government, the NGO programmes (Health, Education, Agriculture, etc), intra and inter village disputes and reports of meetings last held and are indicative of the level of awareness and concern of the members. In ASHA and GRAM the level of awareness and concern does not seem to extend beyond immediate economic and local-level social issues. But in Gudalur, due to the particular objectives of the organisation, the concerns extend to systemic issues as well. In a sangha meeting attended in Gudalur, the main issue under discussion was the occupation of forest lands by members of the sangha and of strategies to deal with the forest department.

## Office Bearers and Leaders

Sanghas in all three cases are governed by a set of office-bearers or leaders( as they are called in Gudalur) whose roles and responsibilities are carefully codified. In Mylavaram once again office bearers attend to their different roles meticulously and women have an

equal share in the leadership. By rule, only in ASHA does one see that if a man is elected as sangha President, the Secretary's position must be filled by a woman.

Though sangha rules refer to elections, in actual practice, office-bearers/leaders are selected by common agreement. The term of office-bearers is also codified but, with the exception of the sanghas in Mylavaram, is not strictly followed.

## Records

Records relating to membership, attendance, minutes of meetings, and accounts exist in all sanghas, the responsibility for maintenance of which usually vests with the Secretary and Treasurer. Leaders in ASHA exhibit the best capacity to independently maintain accounts and other records of the sangha. A large number of sanghas in Mudhol continue to depend on GRAM to maintain their records. In ACCORD serious efforts have been made to enable sangha leaders to keep their own records.

## Finances and Accounts

Every sangha member pays a membership fee to the sangha. Besides this income, sanghas in Mudhol and Mylavaram also charge an interest on the loans given to members. Loans in ACCORD as a rule are interest free. All the sanghas have built up substantial funds through member equity and grants from their promoters. These funds are now entirely self-managed. Sangha monies that are not in circulation as loans to members are generally kept in a bank account which is operated by the office bearers of the sangha and a member of the project.

Financial accountability and transparency is once again best in ASHA. So too is loan recovery. An accounts trainer in ASHA visits all sanghas once a month to check on the correctness of books and to train the leaders in accounts-keeping.

## Federation

The process of federation began within a year in ACCORD's case and somewhat later in ASHA and GRAM. In all three cases, the notion of federating was introduced by the project and was intensely debated by the membership of the sanghas before the process actually began. In ACCORD's case, since collective strength has been both an ideological and operational principle from the start, the need to federate was far more real.

In all three projects, the federations functioned as informal bodies for a year or two before they were formally incorporated. The formal status seems to have been necessitated by the desire of these organisations to have an identity of their own, and to leverage governmental development assistance. All the apex organisations have registered under the Societies Registration Act.

The formation of the Adivasi Munnetra Sangam (AMS) was precipitated by the campaign

on land rights launched by ACCORD. Conceptually, the AMS is one organisation which operates at three levels - the village, the area and the taluk. The tribal staff of ACCORD who are all local are members of the AMS and contribute significantly to the functioning of the AMS. The area level was the weakest level of the three-tier structure of the AMS for some years, but not any more. Today the AMS has an office of its own in Gudalur town and an office in each of the eight geographical areas it covers. These offices have boosted the image of the AMS.

The Ikya Samiti promoted by ASHA in Mylavaram is a federation of 27 independent village sanghas. It has two tiers only, the sanghas at village level and the federation. The area or cluster level of functioning is not seen as necessary due to the relatively compact size of the project area. The Ikya Samiti meets at the project office as it does not have an office of its own.

The sanghas in Mudhol taluk have federated under the Dalit Velugu. Today all the 225-odd sanghas promoted by the two projects that GRAM operates in the taluk, namely, Raipur-Kandli Project (NOVIB funded) and Vittoli Project (ACTIONAID funded), come together under the Dalit Velugu. Like the AMS, the Dalit Velugu is a three-tiered body. It was compelled to introduce a level of functioning at the mandal level because of the sheer size of Mudhol taluk (4 mandals) and the large number of sanghas. The Dalit Velugu rented an office in Bainsa town for a short spell of time but was forced to close it as it proved unaffordable. It now meets at the project office.

The main functions of all the apex bodies are to supervise and support the sanghas, to influence and liaise with government and other development agencies and to build alliances with similar organisations.

The leaders of these apex organisations are primary members of the sanghas. They are elected or nominated for terms ranging from one to two years. In all cases, the leaders exude confidence and a tremendous degree of maturity in dealing with the members and their issues within the organisation and the external environment. Those who were interviewed in the course of the study said they had no political ambitions, despite their new found influence and recognition.

In summary, the thrust of the organisation promoted by ASHA in Mylavaram is towards credit management and accessing government schemes and services. The organisation is characterised by careful codification of almost all aspects of sangha life, strict internal discipline and cohesion, genuine participation by both men and women, financial integrity and good management of sangha funds. The sanghas and the apex are equally strong.

The AMS in Gudalur is an exclusively tribal organisation that works towards strengthening tribal identity and self-confidence, fighting exploitation, struggling for land and in general striving to improve the cultural, social and economic foundations of the Gudalur tribals. In

this organisation rules and regulation are not a fetish. The strength of the organisation is not measured by adherence to procedure but in the expression of solidarity in standing together to redress wrongs or fighting for rights.

The community organisation in Mudhol is apparently stronger at the top (apex) than at the base (sanghas). The male sanghas are by and large weaker than the female sanghas, but men dominate the federation. The male sanghas are falling back on loan repayment, a trend which may lead to organisational disintegration if not firmly nipped in the bud.

## d) Focus on Vulnerable Groups

In the context of this study, the scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, the landless and women would constitute the most vulnerable sections of the community.

ASHA's coverage of the most vulnerable is relatively good. The majority of its clientele are drawn from the scheduled castes who are known to be the poorest of the area. The scheduled tribes come next and rightly so, as demographically they are a smaller group. In terms of promoting gender equality, ASHA's performance is commendable in so much as it has ensured truly equal participation of women in the organisation. By its own admission, ASHA scores its performance vis-a-vis the landless segment of the membership poorly, a weakness it has consciously been working at since the last two years. It is interesting to note that the emphasis on crop credit in the sanghas has contributed to the imbalance of benefits accruing to the landed and the landless.

The scheduled castes and tribes are the poorest people in Mudhol as well. GRAM however has only been able to bring 756 scheduled caste families out of an existing 1869 families into its fold. Similarly only 262 scheduled tribe families out of 472 families have been inducted into the membership. GRAM estimates that about 12% of the members in the male sanghas are, strictly speaking, not eligible for membership, as their annual income and land holdings exceed the prescribed limit. The female sanghas have a much larger percentage of scheduled caste women in the membership than the male sanghas. This is so because the organisation of women's sanghas commenced after GRAM had learnt some lessons in working with male sanghas which it applied in the organisation of women sanghas. As a result of the greater concentration of poor women in the women's sanghas the homogenity of these sanghas seems to have impacted positively upon their functioning. The male sanghas are known to exhibit a tendency to close their doors to new and deserving members because they would not like to dilute the benefits they currently derive from the sangha.

ACCORD maintains the view that the tribals of Gudalur are a homogeneous group, though admittedly the Paniyas and the Kattunaickans are the poorest. They all form a part of the tribal federation, although this study has not probed whether the impact of the project has varied among the different tribes. With regard to women, while ASHA and GRAM have not

only focussed on them, but have also tried to ensure that they have an equal position with men in the organisation, the same cannot be said of ACCORD.

In ASHA women have an equal place in the organisation as compared with men, and have visibly improved their status within the community and larger society as well. The organisation, however, fights shy of dealing with questions of power, attitudes and behaviour of men in the family. A separate space for women to meet has been created through the thrift and credit programme, but these meetings are not used to advance women's holistic empowerment (the process of gaining control over the self, over ideology and resources). As an organisation, ASHA holds the view that women in Mylavaram are quite empowered; that they, in fact, dominate their men. With these blinkers it is unlikely that the process of women's empowerment which is certainly underway in Mylavaram is likely to be given the fillip it deserves.

Though GRAM has created separate sanghas for women it too has limited its agenda to economic issues, credit, savings and government benefits. Issues of personal autonomy and access, ownership and control over resources are not touched upon. Finally, in ACCORD, not much has been done to bring women into the development process as partners with men.

### e) Empowerment

#### At the Individual Level

In all three instances, both at the individual as well as the group level, members of the organisation today feel far more confident of dealing with the outside world than in the past. Previously the mere appearance of a government functionary such as a Police Inspector or Land Tax Collector was enough to scare them. Similarly, tribals in Gudalur, weighed down by feelings of inferiority, would hesitate to sit in a bus beside a non-tribal. Not any longer.

The change in the level of people's self-confidence seems to be the most significant change that has come about in all three cases. Members of the organisation do not hesitate to speak and can debate a point with lucidity and conviction.

The other manifestation of individual empowerment is in the educational sphere. Both in ASHA and GRAM, several sangha members have learnt how to read and write over the years through the adult education classes and through the performance of certain sangha tasks related to record keeping.

Women have come into the development process. In the public sphere, particularly, women leaders have learnt to interact with male colleagues and with government officials with dignity and confidence. Their world has expanded beyond the household. While it would be difficult to say that women have achieved empowerment, they certainly are on

their way there. What seems to be critical to further their empowerment at this stage in all three cases, is an improvement in the perspective, strategies and capacities of their promoters.

## At The Group Level

At the group level, all three organisations have in a sense acquired the capacity to access development benefits, albeit differently. The Ikya Samiti is a rather small organisation with a membership of 2,600 and with no pretensions to political influence. As a matter of fact, politics is kept strictly out of the organisation, which is not to say that the individual members are politically naive or inactive. Despite the prevailing code of ethics which rules out politics, the Ikya Samiti seems to have the best record in accessing development assistance from the government and its agencies. As of September 1993, it has been instrumental in obtaining about Rs.62,84,000 for its members. A very impressive record indeed! The Ikya Samiti and its member sanghas seem to enjoy a great deal of credibility and respect with the administration and local society.

The Dalit Velugu derives its strength from its size - 225 sanghas in Mudhol taluk - and its affiliation with two other people's organisations in the neighbouring district (the Dalit Jyothi and the Dalit Seva Sangham, also promoted by GRAM). The combined membership strength of these three organisations is over 15,000.

In a democratic system that is rooted in the politics of elections, numbers matter. The numerical strength that the Dalit Velugu enjoys in Mudhol taluk vests it with latent power and political strength. In actual fact, however, neither individual sanghams nor the Dalit Velugu as an organisation, actually engages in the electoral process. All the same, the Dalit Velugu is courted by both the local administration and political parties. It has sourced close to Rs. 14,00,000 in development assistance from the Government for its members.

Like the Dalit Velugu, the AMS, with a membership of 7,000, is spread across the entire taluk. The strategies that ACCORD has used to build the AMS have resulted in a more holistic empowerment of its client community than one sees in Mylavaram or Mudhol.

The AMS has established links with the administration and bureaucracy that extend upto the Central Government. Together with ACCORD, it advocates on issues that impact upon tribal life such as land, forests, industry, health and education. It has been instrumental in enabling its members to access simple benefits from the system which are often unavailable to the poor - old age pension, tribal scholarships, etc. In 1993, at the request of the Tribal Welfare Department of Tamilnadu, it prepared and submitted a masterplan for Tribal Development in Gudalur that runs into a few crores of rupees and takes every aspect of tribal life into account. Should this plan be approved, ACCORD will have little need to continue its development assistance to the tribals of Gudalur.

Leaders of the AMS participate in tribal gatherings across the country and are well informed particularly on issues affecting tribals. Although ACCORD holds the view that the lack of education among the tribals in Gudalur has impeded their development, there are not many tribal areas which would have as many educated tribal youth as is the case in Gudalur. The presence of these youth, many of whom are employed by ACCORD, has certainly enabled the process of empowerment in Gudalur.

## f) Sustainability

When queried, members and leaders of all three organisations speak with quiet confidence of the sustainability of their respective organisations.

Currently, the Ikya Samiti (and its member sanghas) appears to be the most sustainable institution. It has the necessary managerial and financial capacity to sustain itself. Some danger, however, may lie in the overriding importance accorded to economic development at the cost of the continuing education and intellectual development of the membership, and of strengthening group solidarity. Once ASHA withdraws, the long arm of party politics may also enter the organisation, bringing in its wake factionalism and personal ambition.

The sustainability of the Dalit Velugu and the sanghas in Mudhol appears tenuous. The sanghas, particularly many of the male sanghas, are weakening rapidly. The aura of power and influence that surrounds the Dalit Velugu leaders may have a corrupting influence on them.

The AMS has the capacity to sustain itself provided the existing tribal staff of ACCORD continue to lend their strength to the organisation. As of now the organisation is financially dependent on ACCORD, though measures are underway to change this situation. What is uncertain is whether the organisation will be able to stand together once basic issues have been resolved and developmentalism takes precedence. The involvement of sangha members is known to ebb in the absence of issues.

## g) Role of the Project

A whole range of factors come into play at the level of the intervening organisation that can influence the success, or otherwise, of its efforts to build an organisation of its clients in a given area. The process of client organisation requires a very different form of NGO intervention if it has to be successful. The socio-economic and cultural characteristics of the client group and the broader economic and political environment are given factors in which the project must operate, once decisions related to "which location and which clients" are taken. Thereafter, the ingenuity of the intervening organisation must take over in formulating and adapting its objectives, strategies, programmes, structure, systems and norms to the given reality of its clientele and their environment, in pursuance and maximisation of the stated purpose to organise the community.

## Organisational Set-up

While all three organisations purport to be working with the people and not for them, it appears that ASHA and GRAM would fit into the framework of 'externally initiated', and ACCORD into that of 'internally initiated'.

ACCORD is unique as an organisation in that it exists exclusively for the development of the tribals of Gudalur. It was incorporated as an organisation only after its prime movers decided to commit themselves to the tribal cause. As an organisation it does not have an agenda apart from the development of the Gudalur tribes; nor does it appear to wish to develop as an organisation *per se* as it intends to wither away once its mission in Gudalur is fulfilled. This character of ACCORD has enabled it to give its undivided energies and creativity to building up the tribal organisation.

ASHA, as an organisation, has a life beyond its projects, though so far, it has remained a 'one project' organisation. This factor, linked to its limited size (only 25 villages in a compact geographical area), has enabled ASHA's success in Mylavaram. GRAM has grown into a large and diverse organisation. Vittoli is one of four integrated development projects that GRAM runs. The multi-project status of GRAM has impaired the quality of the intervention in Vittoli.

The chief visionaries of ASHA and ACCORD have been closely and continuously involved with their clientele, a factor that has enriched the community organisation intervention of these organisations. In GRAM this has not been possible due to the size of the organisation. GRAM's size and spread, however, give it an advantage over ASHA and ACCORD in terms of the numerical strength of the three peoples' organisations it has fostered in the region.

## Purpose of Organisation

Community organisation in Mylavaram has been vastly enabled by ASHA's clear cut, appropriate, singular and consistent purpose or objective of community organisation - the economic advancement of the sangha members. This has enabled ASHA to build a cohesive and sustainable organisation of its clientele.

ACCORD too, has a clearly defined purpose and has remained consistent to it. ACCORD aims to and acts towards defending, establishing and advancing the cultural and economic rights of the tribals, in addition to promoting their development, as a result of which, the process of organising is rendered far more complex. Nonetheless, the duality of purpose, namely developmentalism and activism (a word used by ACCORD to describe the role of the organisation in fighting exploitation, protecting land rights, and protecting the cultural integrity of the tribals), has certainly contributed to building a strong tribal organisation with far reaching impact on the quality of tribal life.

The relative weakness of the sanghas in Vittoli may be attributed in large measure to the lack of initial clarity of purpose in GRAM, the changes in purpose and the inevitable inconsistency between stated purposes and actual implementation. To explain this further, GRAM began its work in Vittoli initially as a service delivery organisation with a beneficiary approach to its clientele and a sangha structure and attitudes appropriate to this approach developed. In a short span of two years, GRAM radicalised its stated purpose. Structures and people's attitudes were slower to change despite GRAM's best efforts. GRAM was also caught in a funding relationship in which it stood committed to a large budget outlay in a limited geographical area for a relatively limited target population. Ground realities ran counter to re-stated purposes, as a result of which the sanghas have neither developed a strong economic orientation nor flowered into 'socio-cultural forums', as GRAM would have them be. It seems that GRAM, at a point, also transferred its energies almost entirely to developing the apex organisation at the cost of the sanghas. The apex has emerged as a seemingly strong organisation on a weak base.

## Project Management

The quality of project management is seen to have an impact on the process of community organisation. The overall efficiency with which ASHA and ACCORD are run has certainly enabled the success of their interventions. ACCORD has succeeded in combining effective project management with a non-hierachical organisational structure and ambience. Ineffective management seems to have been one of the major impediments to the process of organising, particularly in the initial phase of the project at Vittoli.

## Staff

The fact that the organising task is largely the work of the almost all-tribal team of ACCORD, has doubtless facilitated and accelerated the development of the AMS. The considerable investment that ACCORD has made in developing the capacity of its tribal staff is an investment in the sustainability of the AMS. ACCORD has also acted wisely in establishing a scheme that will provide each of its tribal staff with enough funds to re-settle themselves in life once it exits. Thereby, ACCORD has ensured that its tribal staff will not sabotage its exit strategy for reasons of insecurity.

ASHA and GRAM staff are from outside the project area and despite the best efforts of these organisations to train their staff to meet the requirements of the job, it is finally only a 'job' that these staff perform. They do not have a stake in the community unlike ACCORD's tribal staff. ASHA plans to relocate its staff in a new project area as it pulls out of Mylavaram. This policy hopefully will ensure the full support of its staff to its exit strategy.

As regards women staff in these organisations, GRAM has the best record in terms of the number of women who work in the organisation and their capacity to empower women. ASHA has also ensured a fair number of women in the project team. ACCORD's poor record on this account is manifest in the negligible role of women in the AMS.

## Exit Policy

Even if precise exit strategies have not been formulated at the start, both ASHA and ACCORD believe in the notion of withdrawing from the process they have started in Mylavaram and Gudalur. Building autonomy and managerial and financial self sufficiency have been an integral part of their strategy. GRAM, on the other hand, has other ideas and does not see withdrawal *per se* as necessary. The impact of these two positions on withdrawal is evident in the respective community organisations. The AMS and the Ikya Samiti have internalised the notion of having to stand on their own feet, while the issue of GRAM's withdrawal does not seem to be a point of consideration and planning within the Dalit Velugu.

# CHAPTER V

## SOME SIGNIFICANT LESSONS

### Lessons Related to the Target Group

The proper differentiation of the project's target group within the broader community is a pre-requisite. A clear and transparent statement or definition of the target group enables this group to coalesce, their promoters to act effectively, and the broader community to come to terms with the organising process of some of its members and the NGO promoting such organisation.

Homogeneity of the target group is seen to enable organisational cohesiveness. The sanghas in Mylavaram periodically scrutinise the membership to ensure that only those whose land holding size and income level meet the eligibility criteria remain within the sangha, a commendable strength indeed. Periodic redefinition of the target group as the broader environment changes also ensures the continuing homogeneity of the member-ship.

A good basic understanding of the target group, through a process of interaction in the initial or pre-implementation phase of the project, is essential to developing an appropriate project framework. This includes a historical understanding of their problems and inhibi-tions, their inherent weaknesses and strengths, their aspirations and the nature of their relationship with the rest of the community. ASHA seems to have benefited vastly from its preparatory phase, a phase which was used to understand the community as well as to build rapport. Similarly, ACCORD, too, spent the first year in getting to know the tribal community and the problems that beset it, as a result of which it came to understand what would have to form the core of its organising intervention.

GRAM on the other hand commenced its services in agriculture and extension soon after it became operational in Vittoli. It came to understand the community in the course of implementing the project. The parents of children who attended the education programme became the first sangha members. GRAM did not differentiate its target group carefully in the first instance, as a result of which it is still trying to remove members from the sanghas who are not eligible for membership, after seven years of work in Vittoli.

### Lessons Related to Objectives

Even if the objectives are essentially economic and reformist, what is overridingly impor-tant is that these objectives are unambiguous, clearly stated, reflective of the aspirations of the client group and are consistently pursued.

While the stated and actual goals of organisation in Mylaravam may appear limited to economics in comparison with GRAM's stated goals in Vittoli, the community organisation in Mylavaram is stronger and more likely to sustain itself than the organisation in Vittoli. This is due to the congruency that ASHA has maintained between stated goals and actual implemention, and the consistency of direction over time.

## Lessons Related to Strategies

From the experiences at hand, it would seem that it pays to take the time initially, before plunging into full scale project implementation, to understand the community in all its dimensions and to establish a rapport with those sections that are targeted as clients. Failure to do this could result in costly mistakes that are not easily rectifiable and may affect the development process irreversibly. ACCORD's experience in particular, and to some extent that of ASHA, proves the value of collective investigation of the main causes of people's impoverishment and disempowerment, which then provides the basis for determining the core strategies of the project. If ACCORD had not understood the centrality of land to tribal advancement, it may not have been as successful as it has been in organising the tribals.

Secondly, it also seems to benefit the long-term goals of community organisation for self-reliant and sustainable development if external inputs of a material nature are kept to the minimum in the initial phase of the project. Indiscriminate and hasty efforts to alleviate pressing economic needs, in the absence of a sound social foundation and group cohesiveness, may corrupt people's attitudes. Values of self-help, self-reliance and mutual support must first be established as the core values of organisation so as to avoid a mentality of dependence developing among the people.

From ACCORD's experience we see that, even if economic development inputs are provided to clients early on, it does not necessarily weaken the cooperative and self-help spirit when such inputs are accompanied by a process of organising against an external enemy or forces of exploitation that continuously call for collective strength and solidarity.

## Lessons Related to Structure and Functioning

The binding together, or federation of village sanghas, is critical to the development of the local organisation. It is this process which amplifies the power and vitality of the organisation minus which village units of organisation alone would not be in a position to impact upon the larger development process.

The number of levels at which local organisations function are determined by the size of the area under organisation, the nature of the local geography and infrastructure, and the complexity of the organising tasks. In general, three levels - village, area/mandal, and taluk/project area as a whole - appear necessary in larger projects, while the first two

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levels alone, suffice for smaller projects. The number of levels or the level at which organisation originates, appears to be less important than the equal development and strength of each level in the structure of the organisation. Weak sanghas at the village level and a strong leadership at the apex of the organisation does not augur well for the future of the organisation, nor would strong individual village sanghas and a weak apex organisation.

The rotation of leaders every 2-3 years, at different levels of the organisation, ensures that the organisation does not become person-dependent and driven at the cost of broad based participation and leadership.

When the nature of the organisation is akin to that of a movement - which is likely to be the case if the goal of the organisation is to fight local exploitation and distributive injustice - rules and norms of functioning are likely to be accorded less importance than processes that sustain collective morale and solidarity. In organisations which have a more pronounced economic agenda, rules and regulations assume greater importance. The establishment and adherence to important rules and regulations contribute to the proper functioning of the organisation.

## Lessons Related to Vulnerable Groups

The crop credit fund has come to be the pivotal point of sangha existence in both ASHA and GRAM, but it is not of much benefit to the landless. This begs the question whether the basic needs and interests of the landless are compatible with those of the landed membership, and whether these groups of the poor should be organised together. This issue needs to be borne in mind, and given careful consideration in the specific context of each project.

If women are to be included in community organisation, let alone be empowered, the right organisational perspective, policies, attitudes and capacities are essential - a statement that is more easily made than achieved. GRAM, for instance, would truly wish to empower its women clients, but does not fully know how to go about it. The attempts it has made to train its staff in the context of women's empowerment have not been entirely fruitful.

## Lessons Related to Empowerment

The process of organising - regardless of the thrust - is itself an empowering experience, the degree and the wholeness of which varies from case to case, depending on the objectives and strategies that are used to build the organisation. Holistic empowerment is best achieved when the organisation aims to transform all the important dimensions of people's lives, through a process of collective reflection and action on the forces that presently subjugate and oppress them.

## Lessons Related to Sustainability

To be sustainable, an organisation requires a mix of good leadership, self-management skills, adequate and regular supply of money, some basic infrastructure and a capacity of the membership to understand and relate to a changing world. While most organisations are aware of these requirements, they often make the mistake of neglecting the issue of financial self-reliance, in particular, until the eleventh hour. Issues of organisational sustainability are best addressed from the early stages of the project itself, and should form an essential part of periodic review and planning within the local organisation and the NGO. Building the capacity of people to be informed of important issues and policies that relate to the broader development process, and to at least understand the implications of these developments on their lives (if not to act to strengthen or prevent such developments) is advisable. This is an area that is often completely overlooked in the process of organisation building but without which the organisation stands the risk of becoming a puppet in the hands of exploitative forces.

## Lessons Related to the Role of the NGO

The most significant lesson relates to the need for a clear policy on 'exit' from the start of the process if community organisations are to be nurtured as sustainable and autonomous entities. This statement of intent should be clearly communicated to the client community and form an intrinsic part of the monitoring and evaluation system within the NGO and within the community organisation.

The other lesson that may be drawn from the experiences under study is that effective project management can vastly enable effective community organisation. It does not necessarily detract from the 'process' nature of organisational development.

# APPENDIX

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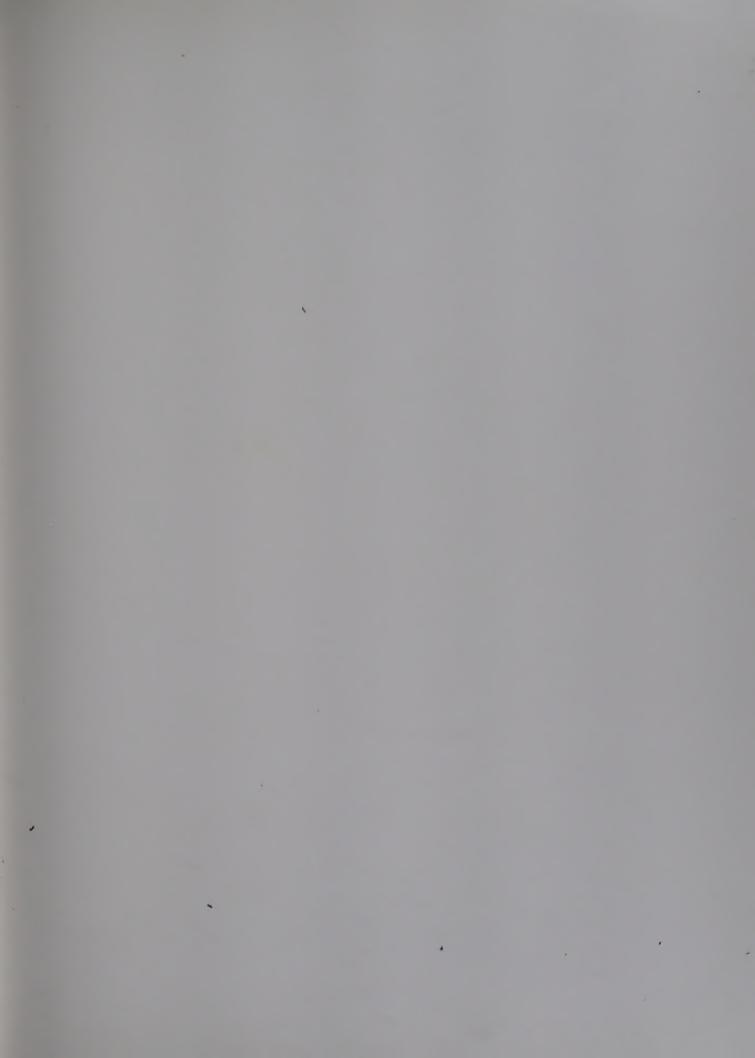
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